The New Criterion

December 1992

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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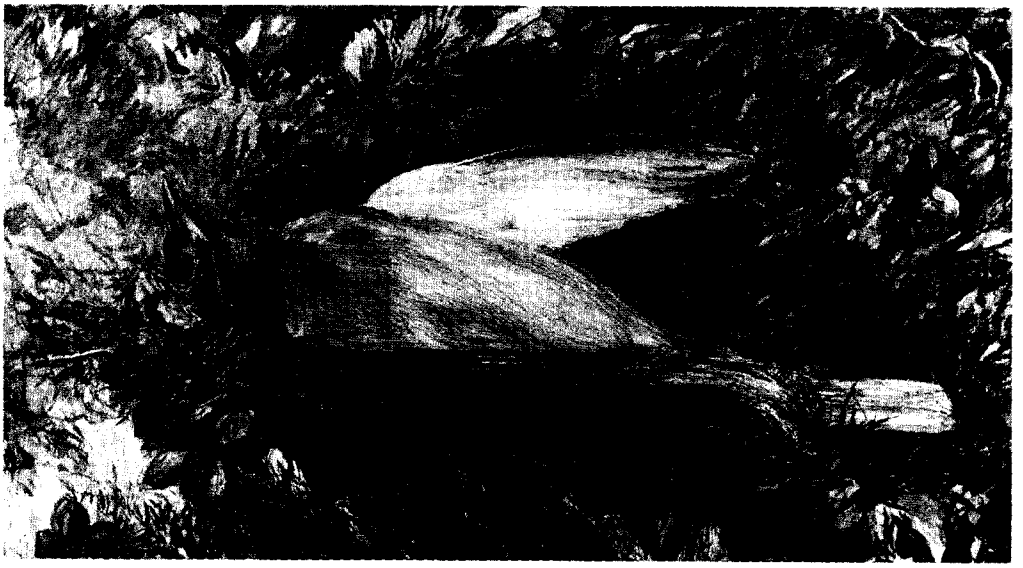

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The New Criterion *December 1992*

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Notes & Comments: December 1992

Post-Soviet denials (continued)

With the demise of the Soviet Union and the piecemeal opening of the KGB and other intelligence files to a variety of scholars, journalists, and political activists from abroad, we have entered upon a period in which the rewriting of history—*our* history, here in the United States—is once again going to be a top priority for the intellectual Left in this country. Now, as before, the goals of this endeavor are to discredit the policies and institutions of the American government, to cast the worst possible doubts on American and Western motives in the conduct of the Cold War, and, most important of all, to acquit the Left itself of any wrongdoing in the long and ignominious history of its support of Communist causes.

The central assumption governing this project in the rewriting of history is the fiercely-held belief that the Communist threat to the West during the long years of the Cold War was at once a malevolent fantasy and a deliberate smokescreen devised by the American government and its courts to disguise the real political objective, which is alleged to have been the destruction of the radical movement in America and its "progressive" program for American society. Or, as a spokesman for the Left wrote in *The Nation* last summer, "to the right wing and its corporate allies [in America], the Soviet Union was never more than a stand-in for the real enemy: home-grown radicalism."

We had occasion to quote this remarkable utterance in our September issue when we discussed the reports then circulating in the press that the late I. F. Stone, a journalist well known for his hard-line espousal of leftist causes, had been accused by a former KGB officer of having been a paid agent of the Soviet government. "We frankly do not know whether the charge against Stone is true or false," we wrote at the time, "for no hard evidence has been produced by either side in the debate." Yet in the absence of hard evidence, Stone's allies on the Left joined in a loud chorus of denial, denouncing the report as a vicious libel. If they protested a little too vehemently in Stone's defense, never pausing to consider what it might mean to their cause if the charge had proved to be correct, they nonetheless had every right to question an accusation that remained unsupported by even a pretense of documentation.

It was not to be expected, of course, that there would be any comparable display of skepticism or indignation by the champions of the Left when, in a sequel to the I. F. Stone affair, we were promptly treated to yet another sensational episode in the ongoing saga of post-Soviet intelligence "revelations"—the claim put forward by General Dmitri A. Volkogonov, the current chairman of the

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Russian government's military intelligence archives, that neither Alger Hiss nor Whittaker Chambers had ever served as spies or agents for the Soviet Union. General Volkogonov made this declaration in a taped interview with John Lowenthal, one of Alger Hiss's staunchest American defenders. In support of this remarkable statement, the general offered absolutely nothing to back it up—not even a cursory description of the kind of archives that were consulted or the scope of the research project that might have led him and his staff to reach this preposterous conclusion. The only detail he could positively confirm, the general declared, was that Whittaker Chambers had indeed been a member of the American Communist Party—a fact well known the world over for many decades and for the verification of which no search of the Soviet archives was necessary. Everything else he said in his interview with Mr. Lowenthal was to be taken on faith.

The euphoria with which the faithful Left has greeted this extraordinary episode was in most respects predictable, yet certain expressions of the euphoria set a new mark for rhetorical obfuscation even in the literature of Hiss's defense. Not surprisingly, the prize for the most shameless sentimental twaddle must go to Tony Hiss. His lachrymose reflections on the Hiss case, "My Father's Honor," in the November 16 issue of *The New Yorker* succeeded in reducing a historical tragedy of large dimensions to the level of liberal soap opera—which, incidentally, is pretty much the standard that the "new" *New Yorker* seems designed to meet. "When people have asked me over the years what it has felt like to live through the Hiss case," Tony Hiss wrote, "I've always said that it has been like living inside a fairy tale, with a curse that couldn't be lifted." The real fairy tale, however, is the incredible series of distortions, half truths, and worse with which the younger Hiss fills this exercise in the rewriting of history. *Mirabile dictu*, Alger Hiss emerges as the immaculate hero, long-suffering and falsely accused, while Whittaker Chambers appears as a paranoid liar motivated chiefly by envy. A fairy tale, indeed.

Elsewhere in the liberal press, Hiss's advocates joined in similar misrepresentations of the historical evidence in their celebrations of their hero's "innocence." It never really mattered to them that General Volkogonov had not produced a single item of evidence to support his claim. But then, the evidence of two trials and an enormous literature had never meant anything to them, either. Hiss *had* to be thought innocent because their cause was believed to be innocent of all wrongdoing, and all the evidence in the world would never persuade them otherwise.

There is, of course, a much larger issue than the fate of Alger Hiss's reputation at stake in this episode. It is the issue of how the history of our country and the history of our century are to be written: on the basis of what evidence, what sources, what facts will these stories be told? For more than seventy years, Soviet "archives" served as a source of the most mendacious histories ever written about the modern world. Never was there any shortage of intellectuals on the Left in this country to lend credence to these ideological fictions. It was in the nature of Soviet historiography to lie about everything, to create a fantasy world that bore little or no relation to the political and social realities of Soviet life and Soviet actions abroad.

General Volkogonov, who purports to be a historian himself, has by no means remained untouched by these deeply entrenched habits of mind. Anyone who has looked into his recent book, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, and who is familiar with the literature on the subject, will instantly recognize that he is not (shall we say?) the most disinterested of historical scholars when it comes to tracing the course of Soviet history. Our own favorite detail is his citation of Louis Aragon and Anna Louise Strong, who were surely among the West's most notorious apologists for Stalin, as reliable sources of information. And the book itself is

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yet another exercise in the effort to beatify Lenin at Stalin's expense. There is even a suggestion that Trotsky's assassination came as something of a surprise to Stalin. And there is no account of the worldwide spy-network that was established under Stalin. Is it any wonder, then, that the author of *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* could find no evidence that Hiss and Chambers had served Stalin's international apparatus?

It is imperative that we in the West do not allow the lure of the labyrinthine Soviet archives—or "archives"—to sucker us into easy and mistaken conclusions about the history that we seek to write by consulting them. These so-called archives are likely to contain as much falsehood as truth—perhaps, given their provenance, even more falsehood than truth. The Soviet Union is gone, but the era of disinformation it initiated on a global scale is far from over. The "revelations" about Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers are a salutary reminder that we have entered a new chapter in the history of the falsehoods that have emanated from this tainted source, and a warning that we cannot allow the former servitors of the Soviet disinformation network to determine our own standards of historical verification.

Meanwhile, the evidence of Alger Hiss's guilt—and Whittaker Chambers's, as well—stands completely unchallanged. Not a single fact has been adduced by General Volkogonov to alter that fundamental truth.

Recordings by the million

A recent issue of *The New York Times* contained a long story by music reporter and critic Allan Kozinn about the announcement of the coming availability of more than a million recorded performances from the former Soviet, now Russian, audio and video archives. Ex-Soviet archives are now the rage: they include of course not just recordings of music but possibly fascinating political material documenting—at least one hopes that is the word that can be used—seventy-four years of bloody tyranny. In the case of the political material, clear title to the material and unimpeded access to the unadulterated sources are still very much in question. It is likely that obtaining an accurate account of what lies locked in the music archives will be a good deal easier.

Of the 1.2 million recordings (which also include political speeches and literary readings), approximately 300,000 are of classical music. Most of them, according to the *Times*, run an hour or longer. At least some of them go back to the 1930s, and include the playing of the composer Dmitri Shostakovich and the pianists Emil Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter, the violinists David Oistrakh and Leonid Kogan, the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, and the conductors Gennady Rozhdestvensky and Kirill Kondrashin. The *Times* omits mention of any performances by such great though lesser-known artists as pianists Heinrich Neuhaus (1888-1964) and Maria Yudina (1899-1970), and, more surprisingly, of any performances by Yevgeni Mravinsky, the conductor widely acknowledged to be the greatest conductor produced in Russia since the October Revolution.

It is a pleasant sign that the new masters of the archives, contrary to former Soviet practice, will pay royalties to the performers whose materials are used; it is pleasant too that some of this material, previously unavailable commercially in the West, will provide a more than superficial glimpse into the Silver Age of Russian musical performance. It is a curious fact that, of all the arts, music and dance—for all the terrible pressures suffered by Shostakovich and Prokofiev, and thousands of lesser fame—were the most kindly treated by Stalin and his henchmen. Unlike writers and visual artists, famous musicians and dancers appear to have been relatively free from arrest, imprisonment, and murder; if they performed well, and paid the neces-

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sary extraordinary obeisance to the all-knowing father of Soviet music and dance, they seem to have been left alone, and, by Soviet standards, cosseted. The reason for this rule of relative mercy remains unclear. Stalin undoubtedly liked music and dance, and especially music. The most distinguished Soviet musicians and dancers were relatively well known and admired abroad, and so partially protected by the existence of world opinion—just another example of how horridly effective Stalinist fellow-travelers were in sustaining, by their silence or often warm approval, a climate in which Stalin could murder anyone else at will.

For music lovers in the West, the release of the best of this hoard of material will be welcome, though not without elements of rue. If this material lives up to its billing—and to what we know of the work of the musicians who appear in these performances—it will be yet another demonstration of the parlous state of music performance today, not just in the West but also in what used to be called the East. And there will be two other, and vastly more, disquieting elements present in our minds as we hear these recordings: first, the fact that each of these recordings was made by artists who, in order to survive, collaborated to some extent with a regime of pure evil; and, second, the question of how great art can exist, as it surely did in the Soviet Union, under conditions of unparalleled barbarism. Whether or not there are answers to these moral problems this side of eternity, it is clear, to our great dismay, that the rapidly concluding twentieth century has thus far failed to provide them.

From the archives of the academy:

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Monday, 28 December

164. Outing Goethe and His Age

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1. "Winckelmann's Progeny: Homosocial Networking in the Eighteenth Century," Simon Richter, Univ. of Maryland, College Park
2. "Homophil und Nekrophil: Jung-Stillings patriarchalische Idylle," Stephan Schindler, Washington Univ.
3. "The Homosexual, the Prostitute, and the Castrati: A Closet of Male Homosocial Desires in J. M. R. Lenz," Roman Graf, Guilford Coll.
4. "In and against Nature: Goethe on Homosexuality and Heterotextuality," Robert Tobin, Whitman Coll.

Publications of the Modern Language Association of America Volume 107, Number 6, November 1992. Program for the 108th Convention, page 1433.

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Aesthetics & ideology in "The Great Utopia"

by Hilton Kramer

[Suprematism] will liberate all those engaged in creative activity and make the world into a true model of perfection.
—El Lissitzky, 1920

Whereas the realist artists and those following similar trends . . . were less willing to greet the Revolution than those following new trends, the latter—whose nonrepresentational methods were very suitable for artistic industry and ornament—proved to be powerless to give psychological expression to the new content of the Revolution. Hence we cannot boast that the Revolution—and, I repeat, in the first years when its effect was strongest and its manifestation most striking—created for itself a sufficiently expressive and artistic form.
—Anatolii Lunacharsky, 1922

The revolution is merciless not only toward those who lag behind it but also toward those who run ahead of it.
—N. V. Ustryalov, early 1920s

It is a melancholy fact of contemporary cultural life the the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia should still remain an object of piety and admiration among so many Western artists and intellectuals some seventy-five years after the immense destructive power of this fateful event was let loose upon the world. True, the apologists for the Stalinist phase of the revolution, though only the other day they commanded a large and vocal following in many quarters of our cultural life, have for the most part fallen silent about its imaginary achievements, and the end of the Cold War has rendered the defense of Soviet Communism in any of its manifestations more or less *de trop*. But silence about a historical catastrophe on this gigantic scale breeds only ignorance and complacency—especially in a culture like ours, which tends in any case to suffer from a chronic case of amnesia about the ideas and events that have shaped its destiny. Hence the many students, if not indeed their teachers too, who, in the last decade of the twentieth century, can no longer be counted upon to know in any detail who Lenin and Stalin were and what they once did to earn our undying opprobrium.

I was reminded of this remarkable state of affairs earlier this fall when I attended the press conference that marked the opening of the exhibition called "The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932" at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.[1] Substituting for Thomas Krens, the director of the Guggenheim, who had temporarily lost his voice, the museum's deputy director, Michael Govan, who had been closely involved in the organization of this mammoth exhibition, admonished the audience of critics, journalists, and art-world

1 "The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932" opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, on September 25, 1992, and remains on view through January 3, 1993.

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professionals to put aside whatever negative associations they might still harbor in regard to Soviet culture and society in order to appreciate the spirit of the 1917 revolution and the ideals that governed its early years. Foremost among the revolutionary ideals cited by Mr. Govan in his fulsome account of the Bolshevik seizure of power, which, it will be remembered by some of us, brought down Russia's first democratic government, was an alleged devotion to what he called "democracy" and "humanism" that was deemed to be so exemplary that it still had "lessons to teach us," he claimed—here in the United States, that is—even today.

This insouciant note of Orwellian revisionism, in which every historical actuality was turned into its rosy opposite, was received by Mr. Govan's auditors without discernible protest, and turned out to be a perfect reflection of the spirit in which "The Great Utopia" was conceived. For this is an exhibition that celebrates not only the new art but the new culture that was created under Lenin and Stalin—the culture of Soviet Communism during the first fifteen years of its existence. "The Great Utopia" thus encompasses both the short-lived modernist phase of early Soviet culture, when the avant-garde was given unprecedented power over the life of art, and the commencement of that far longer anti-modernist period—roughly sixty years—in which Stalin's suppression of the avant-garde, which came to be condemned as a manifestation of "bourgeois formalism," outlived the tyrant himself by more than three decades. The organizers of "The Great Utopia" accord a great deal of respectful attention and documentation to the beginning of this latter phase of Soviet culture, in which Stalin himself began to be deified and slogans such as "The Victory of Socialism in Our Century Is Guaranteed" were mandatory. This has the bizarre effect of giving both the avant-garde and its assassins more or less equal legitimacy in "The Great Utopia," which, among much else, renders the title of the exhibition more than a little moot, if not indeed grotesque.

Given its dates and its materials, this exhibition ought really to have been called "The Life and Death of an Avant-Garde," but that, I suppose, would have compromised the spirit of celebration in which it has been organized and altered the nature of the "lessons" that Mr. Govan would have us learn from the Revolution itself. Indeed, the best way to understand the scope of "The Great Utopia" as an exhibition would be to imagine a survey of the German avant-garde of the 1920s that extended into the mid-1930s for its terminal date. Hitler's brutal suppression of modernism in Nazi Germany was, after all, in many important respects modeled on a cultural policy already well advanced under Stalin in the Soviet Union, and some of the art included in "The Great Utopia"—the paintings and posters of Aleksandr Deineka, for example—differs very little in style or spirit from its Nazi counterpart.

Yet even if the organizers of "The Great Utopia" had not made the fatal error of including this Stalinist material, there would have been more than enough in the avant-garde art of the 1920s—and in the fierce factional power struggles that it engendered—to remind us of the incipient totalitarian impulses that had come to dominate Soviet cultural life even before Stalin achieved power. The fact is, the war against modernism in Soviet art did not originate with Stalin. It was already in progress under Lenin and Trotsky. Its first skirmishes were carried out within the avant-garde itself when it was given dictatorial powers over the life of art by the nascent Soviet bureaucracy in the early years of the Revolution.

Deep and irreconcilable divisions separated the factions that looked upon the aesthetics of abstraction as the emblematic art of the Revolution, signaling its categorical break with the reactionary past and the need to create a new collectivist culture, and those that dismissed not only pure abstraction ("formalism") but all of painting and sculpture as a despised survival of class privilege. In their zeal to place the entire realm of visual expression at the service of Soviet propaganda and thought control, what the mili-

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tants of the latter persuasion advocated—and indeed implemented—was something called Productivist art. This was a species of applied art (posters, photography, printing, manufactured goods, etc.) tethered to the ideological needs of the Soviet political bureaucracy, and within this Productivist program there was no provision for the survival of individualist expression.

Even among the faction of the avant-garde that still believed in the aesthetics of abstraction, moreover, there was little tolerance for artists who did not meet the requisite standards of doctrinal purity. While the terms of this conflict were certainly benign compared to what later occurred under Stalin, the artistic freedom that had flourished so remarkably in the pre-Revolutionary Russian avant-garde was already severely curtailed in the early years of the Revolution. Marc Chagall, to cite a famous example, wasn't shot for refusing to conform to Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist aesthetic, which allowed no alternative to geometrical abstraction; he was simply kicked out of his job at the government-controlled art school in his hometown of Vitebsk.

While they were in a position to wield such power, Malevich and his Suprematist cohorts ruled with an iron hand. (Vasily Kandinsky was yet another famous casualty.) Hence the exodus, as early as 1922, of the artists who in many cases had welcomed the Revolution in 1917 but who quickly and painfully came to realize what their fate would be in the new Soviet state. And as the war against modernism ripened into a more lethal conflict in the course of the Twenties, even a leader of the Soviet avant-garde like Malevich himself took the precaution of shipping a large body of his work to Western Europe for safe-keeping in the face of the impending crackdown, and then, either out of a loyalty to the Revolution or in the interest of sheer survival or, more likely, both, he prostrated himself before the juggernaut of Stalinism by abandoning his Suprematist principles for one or another variety of the representational painting that had become mandatory.

The champions of Productivist propaganda fared no better, morally or aesthetically. Aleksandr Rodchenko, one of the brightest stars of the early Soviet avant-garde, a painter and sculptor of extraordinary gifts, boasted to Alfred H. Barr. Jr., in 1928 "at having delivered the death blow to painting in 1928." But this, of course, was an empty boast. For even while Rodchenko was making the claim, propaganda painting of the most artistically reactionary sort was already enjoying a sanctioned revival, and Rodchenko himself proved all too willing to apply his gifts—now as a photographer—to the service of the very worst aspects of the Stalinist regime. Foremost among the subjects he photographed in 1930, and with great style of course, was the construction of the White Sea Canal, one of the many projects initiated by Stalin that was built by slave labor—"antisocial elements" sent to the gulag—and that resulted in the deaths of many thousands of conscripted laborers. It wasn't a "death blow to painting" that Rodchenko and his Productivist collaborators achieved, but the death of both the avant-garde and the life of art. As the great theatrical director Vsevolod Meyerhold said to his Soviet tormenters in 1939, just before they condemned him to death, "In hunting down formalism, you have eliminated art." That is the resounding epitaph that sums up the fate of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde, and it would have been a service to the public attending "The Great Utopia" at the Guggenheim Museum if those words had been inscribed over the portal to this exhibition.

By settling on 1915 for the opening date of "The Great Utopia," moreover, the organizers of the exhibition have succeeded in giving its public a very distorted impression of the origin of the aesthetic ideas that shaped the best works in the show. For the aesthetic roots of this art are not to be found in Soviet politics, which first annexed the work of the avant-garde and then obliterated it altogether. The roots of everything that is aesthetically worthwhile in the Soviet avant-garde, which is mainly its abstract art, lay in

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the cosmopolitan culture of the pre-Soviet Russian liberal intelligentsia, with its highly developed interest in Western modernism.

You simply cannot make sense of the period without a full-scale account of the Russian avant-garde art scene in the decade preceding the 1917 revolution. It was then that the main lines of artistic thought were developed. It was then, in response to the innovations of the School of Paris, especially Cubism, that an extraordinary number of Russian modernists created one of the most vital avant-garde movements of the time. It was in the nature of this Russian modernism to seize upon every innovation it imported from abroad and accelerate its development in an ever more radical direction. Thus there was created in Russian modernist painting and sculpture a more extreme mode of pure abstraction in art than any of the major artists of the School of Paris had any interest in pursuing.

In the creation of this radical abstract art, which was even more extreme in its elimination of all recognizable references to the observable world than similar developments initiated abroad around the same time by Kandinsky and Mondrian, a belief in the occult—specifically in the theosophical doctrines of Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant, and Rudolf Steiner—played a far greater role than politics, at least in the initial stages of the leap into abstraction. Even the terms of the Russian avant-garde's attachment to utopian ideas about an ideal social order was, at the outset of the movement, far more deeply entrenched in occult mysticism than in Bolshevik ideology. Indeed, the history of the Russian avant-garde and its transformation into the Soviet avant-garde is the history of a cultural movement that began with an ardent espousal of mystical anti-materialism and ended as the captive of the Bolshevik version of dialectical materialism. But then, of course, dialectical materialism as formulated by Soviet theorists in the early years of the Revolution was itself a form of mysticism. It didn't take a great leap in faith for someone of Malevich's inclinations to conflate—or was it only to confuse?—the anti-materialist orthodoxies of theosophy with the dialectical-materialist orthodoxies of Soviet Marxism. Both required a willing and radical suspension of rational disbelief.

In any critical assessment of the relation of aesthetics to ideology in the history of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde, it is perfectly clear that the major and most fundamental aesthetic initiatives all took place before the 1917 revolution. What occurred with the 1917 revoulution, as far as avant-garde art was concerned, was the introduction of an ideological imperative that harnessed—or attempted to, anyway—the aesthetic achievements of the Russian avant-garde to the ideological needs of the new Soviet regime. With few and only minor exceptions, the great era of artistic innovation had occurred before the Revolution, and what we see played out in the decade following 1917 is the at first slow and then much accelerated disintegration of those aesthetic achievements under the pressure of Soviet politics.

Thus, the decision by the organizers of "The Great Utopia" to commence this survey of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde in 1915, less than two years before the Revolution, shifts the entire weight of the exhibition into this later period, creating the illusion that it was the Revolution that set this art movement in motion. This is a rewriting of history worthy of the worst traditions of Soviet historiography, but it is a necessary strategy for anyone who sets out, as the organizers of "The Great Utopia" have so clearly done, to celebrate the cultural achievements of the Revolution and thereby turn all artistic achievement prior to the Revolution into a mere prelude to the main event.

To succeed in this unworthy endeavor, it was necessary for the directors of the Guggenheim to come up with an elaborate political rationale to justify their approach to this subject—a difficult task, you might think, in a period when the history of the Bolshevik Revolution is itself undergoing a closer and harsher scrutiny than ever before and Marxism has been so widely and so definitively discredited. But what has been happening in the

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real world of politics and history seems to have little effect on what academics on the orthodox Left still wish to believe about these matters. After all, we have in the magazine called *October* an academic journal that, as its name indicates, continues to light candles on the altar of the October Revolution and its cultural progeny. For its lead essay in the voluminous catalogue accompanying "The Great Utopia" show, the Guggenheim has come up with a writer of similar views—Paul Wood, whose long examination of "The Politics of the Avant-Garde" is a classic example of Marxist revisionist doublethink about every aspect of the politics and culture of the 1917 revolution and its aftermath. [2]

Mr. Wood writes as a disappointed radical who is always near tears as he contemplates the ruins of Soviet history looking for some evidence to redeem the virtues and achievements once associated with October 1917. In the end he settles for the old Trotskyite idea that Stalin betrayed the Revolution, and thus the Soviet avant-garde, by failing to live up to Lenin's beautiful ideals. (This is probably where Michael Govan got the idea that Lenin believed in "democracy" and "humanism"—a belief far more occult than the doctrines of theosophy.) According to Mr. Wood's essay, the West is also at serious fault for failing to respond to Lenin's call for the Revolution to spread to the advanced capitalist nations of Europe. By this logic, then, responsibility for the emergence of Stalin and Stalinism—never mind Leninism—falls on the laggard working class in the West.

Of course I have simplified Mr. Wood's argument, which is developed with a degree of dialectical virtuosity that is wondrous to behold. It even ends—in keeping with the general air of celebration surrounding "The Great Utopia"—on a note of hope for, of all things, the future of something called "international socialism." Needless to say, there is no parallel essay in this 732-page catalogue of "The Great Utopia" on "The Aesthetics of the Avant-Garde." In orthodox Marxist fashion, the aesthetics of the exhibition—and of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde—have once again been relegated to the "superstructure."

2 *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*; Guggenheim Museum/Rizzoli, 732 pages, $85; $50 paper.

We mourn the passing of Gloria G. Fromm

1931-1992

a valued contributor to The New Criterion

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The treason of the intellectuals & "The Undoing of Thought"

by Roger Kimball

When hatred of culture becomes itself a part of culture, the life of the mind loses all meaning.
—Alain Finkielkraut, *The Undoing of Thought*

Today we are trying to spread knowledge everywhere. Who knows if in centuries to come there will not be universities for re-establishing our former ignorance?
—Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799)

In 1927, the French essayist Julien Benda published his famous attack on the intellectual corruption of the age, *La Trahison des clercs*. I said "famous," but perhaps "once famous" would have been more accurate. For today, in the United States anyway, only the title of the book, not its argument, enjoys much currency. "La trahison des clercs": it is one of those memorable phrases that bristles with hints and associations without stating anything definite. Benda tells us that he uses the term "clerc" in "the medieval sense," i.e., to mean "scribe," someone we would now call a member of the intelligentsia. Academics and journalists, pundits, moralists, and pontificators of all varieties are in this sense *clercs*. The English translation, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*,[1] sums it up neatly.

The "treason" in question was the betrayal by the "clerks" of their vocation as intellectuals. From the time of the pre-Socratics, intellectuals, considered in their role *as* intellectuals, had been a breed apart. In Benda's terms, they were understood to be "all those whose activity essentially is *not* the pursuit of practical aims, all those who seek their joy in the practice of an art or a science or a metaphysical speculation, in short in the possession of non-material advantages." Thanks to such men, Benda wrote, "humanity did evil for two thousand years, but honored good. This contradiction was an honor to the human species, and formed the rift whereby civilization slipped into the world."

According to Benda, however, this situation was changing. More and more, intellectuals were abandoning their attachment to the traditional panoply of philosophical and scholarly ideals. One clear sign of the change was the attack on the Enlightenment ideal of universal humanity and the concomitant glorification of various particularisms. The attack on the universal went forward in social and political life as well as in the refined precincts of epistemology and metaphysics: "Those who for centuries had exhorted men, at least theoretically, to deaden the feeling of their differences . . . have now come to praise them, according to where the sermon is given, for their 'fidelity to the French soul,' 'the immutability of their German consciousness,' for the 'fervor of their Italian hearts.'" In short, intellectuals began to immerse themselves in the unsettlingly practical and material world of political passions: precisely those passions, Benda observed, "owing to

1 *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, by Julien Benda, translated by Richard Aldington, was first published in 1928. This translation is still in print from Norton.

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which men rise up against other men, the chief of which are racial passions, class passions and national passions." The "rift" into which civilization had been wont to slip narrowed and threatened to close altogether.

Writing at a moment when ethnic and nationalistic hatreds were beginning to tear Europe asunder, Benda's diagnosis assumed the lineaments of a prophecy—a prophecy that continues to have deep resonance today. "Our age is indeed the age of the *intellectual organization of political hatreds*," he wrote near the beginning of the book. "It will be one of its chief claims to notice in the moral history of humanity." There was no need to add that its place in moral history would be as a cautionary tale. In little more than a decade, Benda's prediction that, because of the "great betrayal" of the intellectuals, humanity was "heading for the greatest and most perfect war ever seen in the world," would achieve a terrifying corroboration.

Julien Benda was not so naïve as to believe that intellectuals as a class had ever entirely abstained from political involvement, or, indeed, from involvement in the realm of practical affairs. Nor did he believe that intellectuals, as citizens, necessarily *should* abstain from political commitment or practical affairs. The "treason" or betrayal he sought to publish concerned the way that intellectuals had lately allowed political commitment to insinuate itself into their understanding of the intellectual vocation as such. Increasingly, Benda claimed, politics was "mingled with their work as artists, as men of learning, as philosophers." The ideal of disinterestedness, the universality of truth: such guiding principles were contemptuously deployed as masks when they were not jettisoned altogether. It was in this sense that he castigated the "*desire to abase the values of knowledge before the values of action*."

In its crassest but perhaps also most powerful form, this desire led to that familiar phenomenon Benda dubbed "the cult of success." It is summed up, he writes, in "the teaching that says that when a will is successful that fact alone gives it a moral value, whereas the will which fails is for that reason alone deserving of contempt." In itself, this idea is hardly novel, as history from the Greek sophists on down reminds us. In Plato's *Gorgias*, for instance, the sophist Callicles expresses his contempt for Socrates' devotion to philosophy: "I feel toward philosophers very much as I do toward those who lisp and play the child." Callicles taunts Socrates with the idea that "the more powerful, the better, and the stronger" are simply different words for the same thing. Successfully pursued, he insists, "luxury and intemperance . . . *are* virtue and happiness, and all the rest is tinsel." How contemporary Callicles sounds!

In Benda's formula, this boils down to the conviction that "politics decides morality." To be sure, the cynicism that Callicles espoused is perennial: like the poor, it will be always with us. What Benda found novel was the *accreditation* of such cynicism by intellectuals. "It is true indeed that these new 'clerks' declare that they do not know what is meant by justice, truth, and other 'metaphysical fogs,' that for them the true is determined by the useful, the just by circumstances," he noted. "All these things were taught by Callicles, but with this difference; he revolted all the important thinkers of his time."

In other words, the real treason of the intellectuals was not that they countenanced Callicles but that they championed him. To appreciate the force of Benda's thesis one need only think of that most influential modern Callicles, Friedrich Nietzsche. His doctrine of "the will to power," his contempt for the "slave morality" of Christianity, his plea for an ethic "beyond good and evil," his infatuation with violence—all epitomize the disastrous "pragmatism" that marks the intellectual's "treason." The real problem was not the unattainability but the disintegration of ideals, an event that Nietzsche hailed as the "transvaluation of all values." "Formerly," Benda observed, "leaders of States practiced realism, but did not honor it; . . . With them morality was violated but moral notions remained intact; *and that is why, in spite of all their violence, they did not disturb civilization*."

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Benda understood that the stakes were high: the treason of the intellectuals signaled not simply the corruption of a bunch of scribblers but a fundamental betrayal of culture. By embracing the ethic of Callicles, intellectuals had, Benda reckoned, precipitated "one of the most remarkable turning points in the moral history of the human species. It is impossible," he continued,

> to exaggerate the importance of a movement whereby those who for twenty centuries taught Man that the criterion of the morality of an act is its disinterestedness, that good is a decree of his reason insofar as it is universal, that his will is only moral if it seeks its law outside its objects, should begin to teach him that the moral act is the act whereby he secures his existence against an environment which disputes it, that his will is moral insofar as it is a will "to power," that the part of his soul which determines what is good is its "will to live" wherein it is most "hostile to all reason," that the morality of an act is measured by its adaptation to its end, and that the only morality is the morality of circumstances. The educators of the human mind now take sides with Callicles against Socrates, a revolution which I dare to say seems to me more important than all political upheavals.

The Treason of the Intellectuals is an energetic hodgepodge of a book. The philosopher Jean-François Revel recently described it as "one of the fussiest pleas on behalf of the necessary independence of intellectuals." Certainly it is rich, quirky, erudite, digressive, and polemical: more an exclamation than an analysis. Partisan in its claims for disinterestedness, it is ruthless in its defense of intellectual high-mindedness. Yet given the horrific events that unfolded in the decades following its publication, Benda's unremitting attack on the politicization of the intellect and ethnic separatism cannot but strike us as prescient. And given the continuing echo in our own time of the problems he anatomized, the relevance of his observations to our situation can hardly be doubted. From the savage flowering of ethnic hatreds in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to the mendacious demands for political correctness and multiculturalism on college campuses across America and Europe, the treason of the intellectuals continues to play out its unedifying drama. Benda spoke of "a cataclysm in the moral notions of those who educate the world." That cataclysm is erupting in every corner of cultural life today.

In 1988, the young French philosopher and cultural critic Alain Finkielkraut took up where Benda left off, producing a brief but searching inventory of our contemporary cataclysms. Entitled *La Défaite de la pensée*[2] ("The 'Defeat' or 'Undoing' of Thought"), his essay is in part an updated taxonomy of intellectual betrayals. In this sense, the book is a *trahison des clercs* for the post-Communist world, a world dominated as much by the leveling imperatives of pop culture as by resurgent nationalism and ethnic separatism. Beginning with Benda, Finkielkraut catalogues several prominent strategies that contemporary intellectuals have employed to retreat from the universal. A frequent point of reference is the eighteenth-century German Romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. "From the beginning, or to be more precise, from the time of Plato until that of Voltaire," he writes, "human diversity had come before the tribunal of universal values; with Herder the eternal values were condemned by the court of diversity."

Finkielkraut focuses especially on Herder's definitively anti-Enlightenment idea of the *Volksgeist* or "national spirit." Quoting the French historian Joseph Renan, he describes the idea as "the most dangerous explosive of modern times." "Nothing," he writes, "can stop a state that has become prey to the *Volksgeist*." It is one of Finkielkraut's leitmotifs that today's multiculturalists are in many respects Herder's (generally unwitting) heirs. True, Herder's emphasis on history and language did much to temper the

2 *La Défaite de la pensée*, by Alain Finkielkraut; Gallimard, 162 pages, 72 FF. It is available in English, in a translation by Dennis O'Keeffe, as *The Undoing of Thought* (The Claridge Press [London], 133 pages, £6.95 paper).

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tendency to abstraction that one finds in some expressions of the Enlightenment. Ernst Cassirer even remarked that "Herder's achievement is one of the greatest intellectual triumphs of the philosophy of the Enlightenment." Nevertheless, the multiculturalists' obsession with "diversity" and ethnic origins is in many ways a contemporary redaction of Herder's elevation of racial particularism over the universalizing mandate of reason. Finkielkraut opposes this just as the mature Goethe once took issue with Herder's adoration of the *Volksgeist*. Finkielkraut concedes that we all "relate to a particular tradition" and are "shaped by our national identity." But, unlike the multiculturalists, he soberly insists that "this reality merit[s] some recognition, not idolatry." In Goethe's words, "A generalized tolerance will be best achieved if we leave undisturbed whatever it is which constitutes the special character of particular individuals and peoples, whilst at the same time we retain the conviction that the distinctive worth of anything with true merit lies in its belonging to all humanity."

The Undoing of Thought resembles *The Treason of the Intellectuals* stylistically as well as thematically. Both books are sometimes breathless congeries of sources and aperçus. And Finkielkraut, like Benda (and, indeed, like Montaigne), tends to proceed more by collage than by demonstration. But he does not simply recapitulate Benda's argument. The geography of intellectual betrayal has changed dramatically in the last sixty-odd years. In 1927, intellectuals still had something definite to betray. In today's "postmodernist" world, the terrain is far mushier: the claims of tradition are much attenuated and betrayal is often only a matter of acquiescence. Finkielkraut's distinctive contribution is to have taken the measure of the cultural swamp that surrounds us, to have delineated the links joining the politicization of the intellect and its current forms of debasement.

In the broadest terms, *The Undoing of Thought* is a brief for the principles of the Enlightenment. Among other things, this means that it is a brief for the idea that mankind is united by a common humanity that transcends ethnic, racial, and sexual divisions. The humanizing "reason" that Enlightenment champions is a universal reason, sharable, in principle, by all. Such ideals have not fared well in the twentieth century: Herder's progeny have labored hard to discredit them. Granted, the belief that there is "Jewish thinking" or "Soviet science" or "Aryan art" is no longer as widespread as it once was. But the dispersal of these particular chimeras has provided no inoculation against kindred fabrications: "African knowledge," "female language," "Eurocentric science": these are among today's talismanic fetishes.

Then, too, one finds a stunning array of anti-Enlightenment phantasmagoria congregated under the banner of "anti-positivism." The idea that history is a "myth," that the truths of science are merely "fictions" dressed up in forbidding clothes, that reason and language are powerless to discover the truth—more, that truth itself is a deceitful ideological construct: these and other absurdities are now part of the standard intellectual diet of Western intellectuals. The Frankfurt School Marxists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno gave an exemplary but by no means uncharacteristic demonstration of one strain of this brand of anti-rational animus in the mid-1940s. Safely ensconced in Los Angeles, these refugees from Hitler's Reich published an influential essay on the concept of Enlightenment. Among much else, they assured readers that "Enlightenment is totalitarian." Never mind that at that very moment the Nazi war machine—what one might be forgiven for calling *real* totalitarianism—was busy liquidating millions of people in order to fulfill another set of anti-Enlightenment fantasies inspired by devotion to the *Volksgeist*.

The diatribe that Horkheimer and Adorno mounted against the concept of Enlightenment reminds us of an important peculiarity about the history of Enlightenment: namely, that it is a movement of thought that began as a reaction against tradition and has now emerged as one of tradition's most important safeguards. Historically, the Enlightenment arose as a deeply anti-clerical and, per-

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force, anti-traditional movement. Its goal, in Kant's famous phrase, was to release man from his "self-imposed immaturity." The chief enemy of Enlightenment was "superstition," an omnibus term that included all manner of religious, philosophical, and moral ideas. But as the sociologist Edward Shils has noted, although the Enlightenment was in important respects "antithetical to tradition" in its origins, its success was due in large part "to the fact that it was promulgated and pursued in a society in which substantive traditions were rather strong." "It was successful against its enemies," Shils notes in his book *Tradition* (1981),

> because the enemies were strong enough to resist its complete victory over them. Living on a soil of substantive traditionality, the ideas of the Enlightenment advanced without undoing themselves. As long as respect for authority on the one side and self-confidence in those exercising authority on the other persisted, the Enlightenment's ideal of emancipation through the exercise of reason went forward. It did not ravage society as it would have done had society lost all legitimacy.

It is this mature form of Enlightenment, championing reason but respectful of tradition, that Finkielkraut holds up as an ideal.

What Finkielkraut calls "the undoing of thought" flows from the widespread disintegration of a faith. At the center of that faith is the assumption that the life of thought is "the higher life" and that culture—what the Germans call *Bildung*—is its end or goal. The process of disintegration has lately become an explicit attack on culture. This is not simply to say that there are many anti-intellectual elements in society: that has always been the case. "Non-thought," in Finkielkraut's phrase, has always co-existed with the life of the mind. The innovation of contemporary culture is to have obliterated the distinction between the two. "It is," he writes, "the first time in European history that non-thought has donned the same label and enjoyed the same status as thought itself, and the first time that those who, in the name of 'high culture,' dare to call this non-thought by its name, are dismissed as racists and reactionaries." The attack is perpetrated not from outside, by uncomprehending barbarians, but chiefly from inside, by a new class of barbarians, the self-made barbarians of the intelligentsia. This is the undoing of thought. This is the new "treason of the intellectuals."

There are many sides to this phenomenon. What Finkielkraut has given us is not a systematic dissection but a kind of pathologist's scrapbook. He reminds us, for example, that the multiculturalists' demand for "diversity" requires the eclipse of the individual in favor of the group. "Their most extraordinary feat," he observes, "is to have put forward as the ultimate individual liberty the unconditional primacy of the collective." Western rationalism and individualism are rejected in the name of a more "authentic" cult. One example: Finkielkraut quotes a champion of multiculturalism who maintains that "to help immigrants means first of all respecting them for what they are, respecting whatever they aspire to in their national life, in their distinctive culture and in their attachment to their spiritual and religious roots." Would this, Finkielkraut asks, include "respecting" those religious codes which demanded that the barren woman be cast out and the adultress be punished with death? What about those cultures in which the testimony of one man counts for that of two women? In which female circumcision is practiced? In which slavery flourishes? In which mixed marriages are forbidden and polygamy encouraged? Multiculturalism, as Finkielkraut points out, requires that we respect such practices. To criticize them is to be dismissed as "racist" and "ethnocentric." In this secular age, "cultural identity" steps in where the transcendent once was: "Fanaticism is indefensible when it appeals to heaven, but beyond reproach when it is grounded in antiquity and cultural distinctiveness."

To a large extent, the abdication of reason demanded by multiculturalism has been the result of what we might call the subjection of culture to anthropology. Finkielkraut speaks

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in this context of a "cheerful confusion which raises everyday anthropological practices to the pinnacle of the human race's greatest achievements." This process began in the nineteenth century, but it has been greatly accelerated in our own age. One thinks, for example, of the tireless campaigning of that great anthropological leveler, Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss is assuredly a brilliant writer; but he has also been an extraordinarily baneful influence. Already in the early 1950s, when he was pontificating for UNESCO, he was urging all and sundry to "fight against ranking cultural differences hierarchically." In *La Pensée sauvage* (1961), he warned against the "false antinomy between logical and prelogical mentality" and was careful in his descriptions of natives to refer to "so-called primitive thought." "So-called" indeed. In a famous article on race and history, Lévi-Strauss maintained that the barbarian was not the opposite of the civilized man but "first of all the man who believes there is such a thing as barbarism." That of course is good to know. It helps one to appreciate Lévi-Strauss's claim, in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), that the "true purpose of civilization" is to produce "inertia." As one ruminates on the proposition that cultures should not be ranked hierarchically, it is also well to consider what Lévi-Strauss coyly refers to as "the positive forms of cannibalism." For Lévi-Strauss, cannibalism has been unfairly stigmatized in the "so-called" civilized West. In fact, he explains, cannibalism was "often observed with great discretion, the vital mouthful being made up of a small quantity of organic matter mixed, on occasion, with other forms of food." What, merely a "vital mouthful"? Not to worry! Only an ignoramus who believed that there were important distinctions, *qualitative* distinctions, between the barbarian and the civilized man could possibly think of objecting.

Of course, the attack on distinctions that Finkielkraut castigates takes place not only among cultures but also within a given culture. Here again, the anthropological imperative has played a major role. "Under the equalizing eye of social science," he writes,

> hierarchies are abolished, and all the criteria of taste are exposed as arbitrary. From now on no rigid division separates masterpieces from run-of-the mill works. The same fundamental structure, the same general and elemental traits are common to the "great" novels (whose excellence will henceforth be demystified by the accompanying quotation marks) and plebian types of narrative activity.

For confirmation of this, one need only glance at the pronouncements of our critics. Whether working in the academy or other cultural institutions, they bring us the same news: there is "no such thing" as intrinsic merit; "quality" is an only ideological construction; aesthetic value is a distillation of social power; etc., etc.

In describing this process of leveling, Finkielkraut distinguishes between those who wish to obliterate distinctions in the name of politics and those who do so out of a kind of narcissism. The multiculturalists wave the standard of radical politics and say (in the words of a nineteenth-century Russian populist slogan that Finkielkraut quotes): "A pair of boots is worth more than Shakespeare." Those whom Finkielkraut calls "postmodernists," waving the standard of radical chic, declare that Shakespeare is no better than the latest fashion—no better, say, than the newest item offered by Calvin Klein. The litany that Finkielkraut recites is familiar:

> A comic which combines exciting intrigue and some pretty pictures is just as good as a Nabokov novel. What little Lolitas read is as good as *Lolita*. An effective publicity slogan counts for as much as a poem by Apollinaire or Francis Ponge. . . . The footballer and the choreographer, the painter and the couturier, the writer and the ad-man, the musician and the rock-and-roller, are all the same: creators. We must scrap the prejudice which restricts that title to certain people and regards others as sub-cultural.

The upshot is not only that Shakespeare is downgraded, but also that the bootmaker is

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elevated. "It is not just that high culture must be demystified; sport, fashion and leisure now lay claim to high cultural status." A grotesque fantasy? Anyone who thinks so should take a moment to recall the major exhibition called "High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture" that the Museum of Modern Art mounted a few years ago: it might have been called "Krazy Kat Meets Picasso." Few events can have so consummately summed up the corrosive trivialization of culture now perpetrated by those entrusted with preserving it. Among other things, that exhibition demonstrated the extent to which the apotheosis of popular culture undermines the very possibility of appreciating high art on its own terms. When the distinction between culture and entertainment is obliterated, high art is orphaned, exiled from the only context in which its distinctive meaning can manifest itself: Picasso *becomes* a kind of cartoon. This, more than any elitism or obscurity, is the real threat to culture today. As Hannah Arendt once observed, "there are many great authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect, but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they have to say."

And this brings us to the question of freedom. Finkielkraut notes that the rhetoric of postmodernism is in some ways similar to the rhetoric of Enlightenment. Both look forward to releasing man from his "self-imposed immaturity." But there is this difference: Enlightenment looks to culture as a repository of values that transcend the self, postmodernism looks to the fleeting desires of the isolated self as the only legitimate source of value. For the postmodernist, then, "culture is no longer seen as a means of emancipation, but as one of the élitist obstacles to this." The products of culture are valuable only as a source of amusement or distraction. In order to realize the freedom that postmodernism promises, culture must be transformed into a field of arbitrary "options." "The post-modern individual," Finkielkraut writes, "is a free and easy bundle of fleeting and contingent appetites. He has forgotten that liberty involves more than the ability to change one's chains, and that culture itself is more than a satiated whim."

What Finkielkraut has understood with admirable clarity is that modern attacks on elitism represent not the extension but the destruction of culture. "Democracy," he writes, "once implied access to culture for everybody. From now on it is going to mean everyone's right to the culture of his choice." This may sound marvelous—it is after all the slogan one hears shouted in academic and cultural institutions across the country—but the result is precisely the opposite of what was intended. "'All cultures are equally legitimate and everything is cultural,' is the common cry of affluent society's spoiled children and of the detractors of the West." The irony, alas, is that by removing standards and declaring that "anything goes," one does not get more culture, one gets more and more debased imitations of culture. This fraud is the dirty secret that our cultural commissars refuse to acknowledge.

There is another, perhaps even darker, result of the undoing of thought. The disintegration of faith in reason and common humanity leads not only to a destruction of standards, but also involves a crisis of courage. "A careless indifference to grand causes," Finkielkraut warns, "has its counterpart in abdication in the face of force." As the impassioned proponents of "diversity" meet the postmodern apostles of acquiescence, fanaticism mixes with apathy to challenge the commitment required to preserve freedom. Communism may have been effectively discredited. But "what is dying along with it . . . is not the totalitarian cast of mind, but the idea of a world common to all men." Julien Benda took his epigraph for *La Trahison des clercs* from the nineteenth-century French philosopher Charles Renouvier: *Le monde souffre du manque de foi en une vérité transcendante*: "The world suffers from lack of faith in a transcendent truth." Without some such faith, we are powerless against the depredations of intellectuals who have embraced the nihilism of Callicles as their truth.

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Lo Spagnoletto: Jusepe de Ribera at the Met

by Karen Wilkin

For the record, I've been interested in Caravaggio since I was a student—long before Frank Stella claimed him as an ancestor—thanks to Dr. Julius S. Held's inspiring tutelage and an extended residence in Italy hard on graduate school. My interest extends even to the Caravaggeschi, that international group of (mostly) second-string painters who latched on to Caravaggio's innovations, his raw subject matter and thrilling chiaroscuro, and tried to make them their own. They are a mixed bag, at best, albeit with some real surprises among them—as fledgling painters, both the young Rembrandt and the even younger Velázquez flirted with Caravaggesque notions—but if the Caravaggeschi are problematic individually, they collectively bear witness to the powerful hold the work of their chosen master had on the imagination of a generation of artists across Europe, a hold that persisted long after his death at the age of thirty-seven, in 1610.

It's easy to see why. Caravaggio's "signature" images are still potent today, even though his predilection for downstage gore and his dramatic lighting and staging—the word is inevitable, given the relentless theatricality of his pictures—can easily be taken in stride by twentieth-century eyes habituated to high-wattage electric bulbs, cutting-edge photo-journalism, and the excesses of television and the movies. It's arguable, of course, that the graphic horror of Caravaggio's subjects may have seemed less striking to an audience far less insulated from blood, pain, and death than we are. Public executions and lethal street brawls were commonplace events in Baroque Italy, after all, to say nothing of the rigors of dentistry and surgery at the time. But I suspect that when Caravaggio first declared his presence in Rome at the end of the sixteenth century, his spot-lit, close-up scenes of torture and martyrdom, his sinewy, bald-headed old men, his androgynously plump, alluring boys, and—perhaps most striking—the utter self-consciousness with which this was all presented must have been astonishing. It's clear that those blazing shafts of light, falling with equal ferocity on lead players and watchful extras alike in Caravaggio's religious tableaux, profoundly impressed young artists in a society unacquainted with photography, strobes, or powerful stage lighting. And yet, the theater is the first analogy that comes to mind. The front-and-center stabbings, decapitations, and crucifixions in the paintings of Caravaggio and his followers evoke the most violent scenes in Elizabethan drama and like them seem to spring from a deliberate rejection of Classical restraint. (Think first of how horror is dealt with in Greek drama, where dreadful events, foretold by protagonists or described by messengers, occur discreetly offstage, and then consider the onstage carnage of, say, *King Lear*.)

Theatrical as Caravaggio's presentation was, it coexisted with an apparent realism that made the imagined scenes all the more convincing—no movies, remember—and per-

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haps accounts, as well, for the pervasive influence of his approach. Caravaggio's figure types are not idealized spiritual paragons but are wholly of this world. His pilgrims and barefoot saints are sturdy peasants who show signs of hard living: coarse clothing, calloused palms, and thickened, dirty feet. His angels are not airborne wraiths, but kids recruited from the street who require eiderdowns of cloud to support them in a heavenly zone. His martyrdoms are like illustrated manuals: how to dispatch a troublesome evangelist with a sword, how to erect a cross with a robust, elderly man attached to it.

Envisioning biblical events in a populist manner was not Caravaggio's invention—a "low" church movement was already stirring, through the influence of San Filippo Neri, for example—but the literalness of his interpretations sometimes got him into trouble with the Counter-Reformation authorities who sat in judgment on the decorum of religious depictions. When he used the bloated corpse of a drowned prostitute fished from the Tiber as the model for the Virgin on her death bed, the result was rejected by its commissioners, for perhaps obvious reasons, as was a Saint Matthew who required the guidance of an angel's hand to write the Gospel. What was deemed unacceptable there was the implication that the evangelist (a former tax collector, you will recall) was illiterate. Yet Caravaggio lacked neither high-church patronage nor commissions after about 1600; the conflicts were about seemliness, not the fact of realism itself. The accepted version of the disputed Saint Matthew, for example, in the Contarelli Chapel of San Luigi dei Francesi, is only slightly less prosaic than the rejected canvas: a streetwise urchin-angel leans in from above, ticking off the points to be covered on his fingers, while Matthew struggles to transcribe the message, twisting in an effort of concentration.

In the long run, Caravaggio's extremely individual approach was no match for the enduring power of the Classical tradition, that thread running from Greece and Rome to the Renaissance that became the Academy's (eventually debased) standard of excellence. But for much of the seventeenth century, the influence of Caravaggism reached across Europe. Flemish, Dutch, French, and Spanish artists echoed his innovations, to say nothing of Italians and expatriate *stranieri* and *forestieri*—foreigners and outlanders—resident in Italy.

For the most part, the Caraveggeschi were more adept at echoing the manner than the meat of Caravaggio's style. Only a few managed to transform that manner into something personal, but many of them were extremely competent, even highly accomplished painters, if not strikingly inventive ones. Curiously, many of them were at their best when they relied most on Caravaggio's example, when they aimed most directly at the solemn horror, the awe-inspiring intensity best described by that marvelous word *terribilitá*, of his most powerful pictures. This is not to say that the most convincing of the Caraveggeschi are interesting only in relation to their chosen mentor, but it is impossible to grasp what they are about without reference to the ultimate source of their aspirations.

This was immediately apparent in the recent exhibition of the work of one of the most original and persuasive of the group, Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652), at the Metropolitan Museum.[1] Ribera, known as lo Spagnoletto—"the little Spanish guy"—spent virtually all his working life as a painter in Italy, first in Rome, within seven years of Caravaggio's leaving the city, and then in Naples, where the effect of a few brief visits by Caravaggio was deep and long-lasting. The exhibition, a well-chosen, pared-down version of larger retrospectives organized in Naples and Madrid to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of Ribera's birth,

1 "Jusepe de Ribera: Spanish Realist in Baroque Italy" was on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from September 18 through November 29, 1992. A catalogue, with essays by Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez, Nicola Spinosa, and others, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Harry N. Abrams (290 pages, $60; $45 paper).

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needed no justification other than the opportunity it afforded for a reasonable overview of a significant painter little known in this country, but in some ways the questions it raised about influence and originality were even more challenging than the paintings, drawings, and prints on display.

Ribera is, in any case, an enigmatic figure. As the catalogue of the exhibition points out, some portions of his life and work are known in extraordinary detail, while others remain completely obscure. His first biographer, who wrote in the eighteenth century, is notoriously unreliable, and until the discovery within the last century of unequivocal parish records, even Ribera's place of birth was subject to argument. (The artist always added, when he signed his pictures, the declaration "Español," and described himself as from Valencia, but there was no *proof*.) Yet meticulous information about Ribera's domestic finances was available from the archives of the Banco di Napoli, detailing, among other things, "the acquisition of a pair of mules from his sister-in-law" and "the installation of a new set of locks on his house in the Strada di Santo Spirito."

Even today, apart from his birth and baptism in Játiva, near Valencia, the second son of a shoemaker, nothing is known of Ribera until his arrival in Italy. His training as an artist is a matter of pure speculation, based on a likely scenario for a talented, ambitious young man from the provinces at the time, and on the better-recorded histories of his contemporaries. What is certain is that in 1611 Ribera was in Parma, sufficiently esteemed at the age of twenty to be under the protection of the powerful Farnese family, and that in 1613 he was in Rome, an established enough painter to request admission to the Accademia di San Luca, the equivalent of master status in the artists' guild. The work that survives from these years suggests that Ribera was an early convert to Caravaggism. A much admired altarpiece of Saint Martin dividing his cloak with a beggar, painted during the sojourn in Parma, has been lost and is known only from an engraving that suggests little other than an early taste for naturalistic detail, but a group of half-length figures symbolizing the senses, usually assigned to this period, are typically Caravaggesque in their sturdy peasant types, indeterminate dark backgrounds, strong lighting, and aggressive close-up placement.

It is possible that the young painter was already aware of Caravaggio's characteristic manner because of a copy of the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* brought to Valencia by the archbishop, but whether or not Ribera had seen this picture, there were ample opportunities for exposure to the new tenebrist approach, as practiced by master and follower alike, when he arrived in Rome. Caravaggio was no longer in the city, having been exiled in 1606 for generally atrocious behavior to die at Porto Ercole in 1610, but the masterworks of his Roman years were readily visible. In Santa Maria del Popolo, a short walk from Ribera's apartment in the artists' quarter of the Via Margutta, there was the savage, original *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* and the uncanny *Conversion of Saul*, that unlikely tangle of rapt figure, outstretched arms, and the back end of a tightly folded horse. San Luigi dei Francesi boasted the slightly earlier Saint Matthew cycle, while single-panel altarpieces were installed in several other churches. Rome was temporary home, as well, to a startling number of Caravaggio's sincere admirers and followers; by 1615, when Ribera was living with his artist brother and several other Spanish artists on the Via Margutta, a Northern contingent, including Baburen, Terbrugghen, Honthorst, Valentin, Douffet, and Vouet, had arrived, while the Italian members of the Caravaggio circle, in residence or passing through, included, among others, Cecco del Caravaggio, Orazio Gentileschi, and Bartolomeo Manfredi.

By the end of 1616, Ribera was in Naples and cannily married to the daughter of a well-established Italian painter, which assured him of excellent local connections in spite of his *forestiero* status. He remained in Naples for the rest of his life, acclaimed, admired, and receiving commissions from both Italian and Spanish patrons. Asked by a fan

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why he didn't return in triumph to Spain, he implied that the glamour conveyed by his Italian residence, which certainly made his work more desirable to his compatriots, would quickly be exhausted should he be close at hand on his native soil.

Ribera's success meant that, like any sought-after artist of the time, he employed a full complement of assistants to produce multiple versions of his most esteemed compositions, a practice guaranteed to produce art-historical wrangles about the authenticity of the pictures that have come down to us. Not surprisingly, such conflicts served as a subtext to the exhibitions organized in honor of Ribera's quadricentennial. Some pictures seen in Naples were apparently excluded from the Madrid version of the show, while the New York exhibition was different again, for a variety of reasons, including Metropolitan curator Keith Christiansen's declared desire for a show of major pictures that would "mean something to Americans." Reports of proceedings in Europe suggest that while Italian and Spanish scholars disagree among themselves about a number of Ribera's paintings, they are united in their opposition to certain American conclusions. The New York catalogue's essays and entries, by an international roster of Ribera scholars, bear witness to acute differences of opinion and interpretation. Luca Giordano is described as having studied with Ribera in one essay, but this is denied in another. The possible influence of Ribera on the otherwise inexplicable Caravaggism of Velázquez's earliest works, such as the astounding, rock-solid *Waterseller of Seville* (*c.* 1622, Wellington Museum, London), is another matter for dispute. Was the young Velázquez aware of Ribera's series symbolizing the senses, which was painted for a Spanish patron and brought to Spain soon after its completion? And so on.

The joint thesis of Spanish, Italian, and American contributors to the Metropolitan's show, despite the rather testy differences manifest in the catalogue, is that Ribera is distinguished from his contemporaries by his successful amalgamation of Caravaggesque drama, heartfelt realism, and Classical refinement. As Mr. Christiansen rather elaborately puts it in his introduction, Ribera's paintings

> eloquently refuse to acknowledge a tidy division between art as mimesis and art as exposition. It is the union he effected between the complex and elevated language of classical style, with its emphasis on gesture to communicate emotion and drawing as a means of transposing the imaginings of the mind, and the imperatives of realism that set his art apart . . .

The title of the show, "Jusepe de Ribera: Spanish Realist in Baroque Italy," reinforced this notion of otherness, unequivocally declared by the installation and text panels at the Metropolitan. Attention was called to the vernacular, naturalistic particulars of Ribera's earliest extant works, evidence of a taste for unlovely but picturesque details that has been called more Flemish than Caravaggesque. (Given Spain's historic ties to the Low Countries, not to mention the sheer number of Dutch and Flemish Caravaggeschi resident on the Via Margutta, it's not so far-fetched.) The perception is borne out by those possibly so influential half-length figures symbolizing the senses, a collection of arrestingly individualized portraits, with equally individualized attributes. Witness the startlingly contemporary features, the telescope and eyeglasses in the *Sense of Sight* (Museo Franz Mayer, Mexico City) or the dish of eels and spill of olives in the *Sense of Taste* (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford). (The authorship of the *Sense of Smell*, with its unlikely display of onion, garlic, and orange blossom, is disputed.) Similarly, a *Saint Jerome and the Angel of Judgment* (Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte, Naples) is as notable for the sagging flesh of the old man's skinny torso as it is for its indebtedness to Caravaggesque types and compositional strategies. By contrast, as the catalogue entries rightly point out, Caravaggio's paintings appear austere and abstract, more

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dependent on firm architectural composition as revealed by contrasts of light and dark, and on a simplified, idealized conception of form, than on the realism that seemed primary when the pictures were first shown.

What further sets Ribera's works apart, for much of his career, is his touch, a sense of a correlation between the density of paint and the intensity of his scrutiny of the world around him. It's not the flashy brushwork of Hals—or of the problematic Luca Giordano, for that matter—but rather a deliberate accretion punctuated by even denser passages of impasto that accentuate particulars of actual texture: flesh, cloth, still life, fur, and much more. You are almost always aware of the *paintedness* of a Ribera, and the tension between this declaration of artifice and the meticulous, anecdotal naturalism of the details is often very much to the benefit of the pictures. His sleek late paintings, made when he was ill and unable to work much of the time, are noticeably lacking in both the vigorous surface and the slightly discomfiting particulars of his earlier works, with the result that the late efforts seem not only smoother but somewhat generalized and a little soft. Paradoxically, they also have a tendency to split into small increments—a wonderfully painted pair of angels' heads or a seductive bit of still life, a brilliant drapery passage or a lovingly rendered "braided" loincloth—rather than to coalesce into expressive wholes. Yet the late works were presented, at the Met, as the culmination of a career, the result of Ribera's attentiveness, late in life, to the High Renaissance tradition of Titian and Veronese, as well as to acclaimed artists of his own time, such as Rubens and Van Dyck, themselves responsive to these Renaissance masters.

The correlation was certainly made clear, at the Metropolitan, by the elegant, suavely balanced *Baptism of Christ* (1643, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy), whose luminous color and refined figure types were evidence of sources quite unlike those of Ribera's earlier works. The rather saccharine madonnas of the later years, however, pointed forward rather than backward. So that was where Murillo got it from! The younger painter seems to have founded an entire career on Ribera's late-style madonnas, adding, of course, a substantial dose of sentimentality and a dollop of Zurbarán.

Whether you agreed with the text panels or not, the exhibition offered some of Ribera's best works, including the Prado's spectacular *Martyrdom of Saint Philip* (1639). The heroic, collapsing nude figure of the saint zigzags across the canvas and, like the attendant figures about to hoist him agonizingly aloft, seems almost to escape the confines of surface, so close does he come to the edge of the "stage." This forward thrust, in turn, heightens the importance of the compressed but thinly painted group of women, trapped lower left, who fix the viewer with an accusing eye. The Prado provided, too, the introspective *Dream of Jacob* (1639), where the bulk of the reclining shepherd, heavily asleep and massive as the rocks he rests on, is played against a luminous sky and an all but unseeable dream-vision. Almost equally fine is a bizarre standing portrait of an ascetic Jesuit and an improbable but magnificently painted lion (1638, Museo Poldi-Pezzoli, Milan).

But for sheer strangeness, admittedly because of its subject as much as anything else, there was little to equal the ferocious double portrait of *The Bearded Woman* (*Magdalena Ventura with Her Husband*) (1631, Palacio Lerma, Fundación Casa Ducal de Medinaceli, Toledo). It's an unforgettable picture: a middle-aged male face stares you down from above a confrontationally posed woman's body clad in an embroidered collar and a lace-trimmed apron. All other details fade into irrelevance against the shocking sequence of vigorous black beard, near-spherical breast and rigid child, lips pursed to take the proffered nipple, that is the dramatic heart of the painting. If you can wrench your eyes away from that startling core, you discover that the hands holding the infant are as robust, masculine, and work-lined as the bearded head, and note the tension and anxiety on the face of the half-hidden figure

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of the husband peering from the shadows over his freakish wife's shoulder.

The well-known *Drunken Silenus* (1626, Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte, Naples) runs the portrait of Magdalena Ventura a close second for strangeness, probably because it seems positively improper to be able to see that much unclad blubber in a public place. Ribera's Silenus, eerily pale against melting darkness, is a disturbingly equivocal, unappetizing creature, like one of Caravaggio's boys run to seed after thirty years or so of self-indulgence. Rubens's famous version of the drunken reveler is, by contrast, a beefy, well-muscled, and unquestionably male person, albeit an overscaled one, rather than a heap of ambiguous flesh. Of course, the damaged condition of the drapery below Silenus exacerbates the grossness of that belly, but not much.

Once you get past the slightly obscene display of meat, the real quality of Ribera's picture becomes evident in the "periphery" —the braying ass's head jutting in from the left and the boy satyr with his upthrust arm and open-mouthed grimace, like a cheerful version of Caravaggio's terrified boy in the pallid, halogen-lit *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*. The chain of forms bulging at us, the knees, elbows, fists, heads, cup, and wineskin that collide in the center of the painting, is a tour de force of construction and, indeed, serves as the pivot on which the entire picture turns. The void defined by the crouching reveler who leans in to drink from Silenus's upraised cup is all that keeps that monstrous belly from falling out of the painting.

This kind of structure, an eloquent play of sculptured, geometric voids against strategically lit, clearly articulated forms that carry the narrative, is typical of Caravaggio at his best—as in that pregnant space between the fallen saint and his executioner, bridged by the restraining diagonal arm, in the center of the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*. It is an essential component of Ribera's best works as well, and, ultimately, it is this understanding of dramatic spatial organization, of expressive staging, not the bald-headed saints or trumpeting angels leaning on clouds, the downstage horrors or the attachment to natural appearances, that links Ribera most directly to Caravaggio and separates him from the general run the Caravaggeschi. The closer Ribera gets to that kind of clearheaded stagecraft, the better his pictures get. Otherwise they tend to dissolve into a series of small if extremely well-painted events.

Where does Ribera rank? He is a painter of considerable originality, within a well-defined approach, which certainly puts him in the forefront of the Caravaggeschi. Ribera more than holds his own against the classicizing Italian painters of his era, such as Domenichino, whom he regarded as his principal rival. But even Ribera's most enthusiastic admirers would have to admit that in comparison to the greatest of his contemporaries, such as his compatriot Velázquez, lo Spagnoletto must gracefully step back.

Yet to be in the first rank of the second category is not an inconsequential position, especially when the first rank is reserved for painters like Velázquez or Rembrandt or Rubens or Poussin. Ribera is a painter eminently worth looking at more closely. Happily, the Metropolitan's fall exhibition allowed us to do just that.

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Hemingway unbound

by James W. Tuttleton

Isn't that a goddam hell of a letter from a guy whose been like Smith and I have been? . . . It's hell when a male knifes you—especially when you still love him.

—Ernest Hemingway, in a letter to Howell Jenkins, March 20, 1922

The radical-feminist call for the ejection of Ernest Hemingway from the canon of classic American writers does not seem to have had an effect on American book publishing. Studies of Papa's fiction continue to proliferate: more than twenty such books were published in the 1980s. And, despite Carlos Baker's apparently definitive biography of 1969, there has been a steady stream of Hemingway lives that testify to the ongoing public fascination with the man and writer. Lesbian ideologists in the academy—intent on transmogrifying Hemingway into a "chainsaw sexist" (the phrase is Susan F. Beegel's in *American Literary Scholarship* [1990])—may bitch that Hemingway was a macho fake and a sexist pig whose simplistic stories of sex and safaris degrade women. But as new facts about Hemingway's life and his relationships have emerged, fact by fact, the image of a complex, deeper, and more difficult writer has come into focus, a writer who simply cannot be tied down in any gender-obsessed strait jacket.

James R. Mellow's *Hemingway: A Life without Consequences* is the most recent of the new lives.[1] It must be said at once that Mr. Mellow's work reflects, in its way, the obsessive preoccupation with gender in our time.

But Mellow's work has the merit of deriving from some seven years of serious thought and extensive research—much of it conducted in the Hemingway papers at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston—and it is certainly one of the best of the recent lives. In these pages Mellow gives us a rich, well-rounded, and expertly written account of an artist whose war wounds, many marriages, diverse friendships, and outdoor adventures would have left a lesser man without even the time to write. Yet Hemingway managed to create an extraordinary gallery of characters who are brought to life in that evocative style marking the memorable Nick Adams stories, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), among others.

The richness of this new biography arises in part from Mellow's expert command of the context of friendships surrounding and informing Hemingway's life. *Hemingway* may, in fact, be seen as part of a triptych that includes two other Mellow biographies—*Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (1974) and *Invented Lives: F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald* (1984). The lives of Hemingway, Stein, and Fitzgerald overlap at so many

1 *Hemingway: A Life without Consequences*, by James R. Mellow; Houghton Mifflin, 704 pages, $30.

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points and their prose is so imaginatively interrelated that Mellow's previous biographical research, on Papa's sometime friends, invariably enriches this life.

Life—anyone's life—is a messy affair, with false starts, abandoned plans, unexpected contingencies, and roads taken or not, as the case may be. But the art of the biographer—if he is not Carlos Baker—is the art of discovering an order latent in the mess, a key to the life, the figure in the carpet. Various biographers have seen various figures in the carpet of Hemingway's life and work. In *Ernest Hemingway* (1952; revised, 1966), Philip Young argued that the key to understanding Hemingway was the trauma of his World War I wounds, at Fossalta di Piave on July 8, 1918, when 227 fragments of Austrian trench-mortar shrapnel riddled his body and nearly killed him. Hemingway said that the concussion of the shell made him feel that his soul was momentarily sucked out of his body, like a silk handkerchief slipped out of a breast pocket by its corner. A number of the stories meditate darkly on this experience of nearly dying, of which the following passage, in "Now I Lay Me," is representative. Hemingway has Nick Adams think:

> I myself did not want to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body. I had been that way for a long time, ever since I had been blown up at night and felt it go out of me and go off and then come back. I tried never to think about it, but it had started to go since, in the nights, just at the moment of going off to sleep, and I could only stop it by a very great effort.

The chronic insomnia of Hemingway's characters and their *pavor nocturnus*; their repression of cerebral thought and their indulgence in the senses (especially in the "giant killers" sex and drink); their existential nihilism; their need to create a clean, well-lighted place, a place of order and self-imposed meaning in the dark abyss of the cosmic *nada*; their brave (and even foolhardy) solicitation of physical danger, amounting almost to a suicidal attraction—all of these are to be understood, Philip Young told us, as Hemingway's response to a psychic trauma so profound as to portend his eventual suicide. And, in fact, though he hated Young's book, Hemingway was later to take his own life.

Other biographer-critics have found a different figure in the carpet. Peter Griffin's *Along with Youth: Hemingway: The Early Years* (1985) dutifully covers familiar terrain, but it is to be criticized—according to Michael S. Reynolds—for reflecting two erroneous assumptions: that "(1) any fiction that Hemingway wrote was actually biography; and (2) anything Hemingway put on paper, in letters, journalism, or fiction, is true." Reynolds in fact overstates the case, but Griffin's life does constitute a cautionary instance of confusing the writer's life and the published work. Yet Hemingway's stories so often advert to specific events that demonstrably mirror his own life that the temptation to biographical interpretation is well nigh irresistible. What are we to do with the many instances, in the fiction, where Hemingway protagonists ruminate, in virtually identical terms, on their war wounds? Where they excoriate the mother? Where they reflect contemptuously on the suicide of the father? Or where the real-life names of Hemingway's models have not even been changed?

Reynolds himself is also one of Hemingway's biographers and thus is, by his own admission, hardly disinterested in his assessment of Griffin's life. Reynolds's still-in-progress five-volume biography—so far only *The Young Hemingway* (1986) and *Hemingway: The Paris Years* (1989) have appeared—is as yet too incomplete to judge. But Reynolds proposes in his way that the key to understanding Hemingway is to feel and think what Hemingway felt and thought. Reynolds thus provides us with an "inside narrative," marked by a stream-of-consciousness technique, in which the biographer moves into and out of Hemingway's consciousness. Reynolds's "mind-reading" is, however, based on authentic documents and

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thus has a factual basis. This "being inside the mind of Hemingway," it must be said, is not always a pleasant experience, since, for Reynolds, Hemingway had "a mean, bullying streak that some people brought to the surface without even trying." But if appropriating the consciousness of your biographical subject is a fictional technique, Papa has always brought out the mythmaking propensities of his critics. And in any event there has been so much written about him that biographers are now hard pressed to find a new angle.

In yet another recent life, *Hemingway* (1987), Kenneth Lynn makes it new by finding the novelist's mother to be the key to the writer's art. We have long known that Hemingway regarded his mother as being as dangerous dead as most women are alive. (Hemingway once said: "I know I'd never go to her funeral without being afraid that she was boobytrapped.") What could she have done to him? Dominant, overbearing, and emasculating, Grace Hemingway dressed and treated the boy Ernest like a girl, while praising his little manliness, with the effect that the boy suffered a sexual wound, developed an androgynous sensibility, and experienced lifelong male insecurity and sexual anxiety. If the writer blamed her for this, the fiction he wrote is, for Lynn, a tissue of conflicted sexual feelings that are manifest in transsexual fantasies, motifs of twinning, and overtones of incest. Lynn reads the several novels and stories as expressive, more or less, of a recurrent and irresistible longing in some part of Hemingway's psyche to experience and recount life as it is experienced by a woman. Certainly there are indeed some remarkable stories which center on the experience of women characters—"Up in Michigan," for example, and "Cat in the Rain." One would think that Lynn's sympathetic analysis of the deep feminine component of Hemingway's psyche, and the literary transformations of it in the fiction, would have assuaged the misplaced anger of radical feminists, who ought now to have a ground for seeing Hemingway in a more sympathetic light, as a wounded figure struggling to give expression to the γυνή within. But somehow Hemingway is still widely regarded, by some of the membership of the Modern Language Association, as antifeminist through and through and worthy only of denunciation. Only a male critic, Mark Spilka, in *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny* (1989), has taken up the critical challenge posed by Lynn's reconfiguration of the psychic life of the novelist. (Setting Grace aside for the moment, Spilka finds that elements of androgyny, or at least the confusion of gender roles, in fact permeated the Victorian literature that Hemingway read and so naturally found its way into the prose as a *Zeitgeist* element.)

If we turn away from outraged literary criticism by women to biographies of Hemingway (or of his wives) *by* women, we note a curious fact: there is more sympathy for the writer than one might have supposed. For Hemingway's women biographers, it is of course the writer's relationship with women that is the key to the life. Many of Hemingway's sisters, lovers, wives, and ex-wives —Marcelline and Carol Hemingway, Agnes von Kurowsky, Hadley Richardson, Pauline Pfeiffer, Martha Gellhorn, and Mary Welsh, among others—wrote about or talked about him in the heterosexual context and often at length; and it is surprising to note that, whatever their personal stresses and strains, with the exception Martha Gellhorn they all remained on fairly good terms with Hemingway while he was alive; and sometimes —as Bernice Kert notes in *The Hemingway Women: Those Who Loved Him—The Wives and Others* (1983)—these women afterward became friends of one another.

But didn't Hemingway really hate women? Wasn't he sadistic to them? The question recurs in feminist criticism. A friend of Hemingway's, Pete Lanham, concluded after a visit to the Finca during Pauline Pfeiffer's time that Ernest hated all women except the one who was currently a good sex partner. But Miss Kert observes otherwise: "The reverse may be closer to the truth—that Ernest liked and admired many women, but

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could not make the necessary adjustments in close relationships." Well, if he couldn't make the necessary adjustments, weren't these women's lives pretty much hell?

Mary Welsh Hemingway, the novelist's fourth wife, was so often "pitied" by feminists who supposed her life with Hem must have been awful that she concludes *How It Was* (1976) with a bit of invented dialogue in which she answers the questions that were so often put to her. One of these involved her "submission" to her husband: "Did you feel yourself 'slaving' for Ernest in Cuba?" And she responds: "I slaved at the Finca as that lovely man, Artur Rubinstein, slaves at the piano. Most blessed are they who enjoy their work, I think." Another similar question was put to her: "Do you concur that men are chauvinist pigs?"—to which she responded:

> No more than that women are chauvinist sows. I'm thankful for almost every man I've known and the mother who produced him. I've been remarkably lucky with men friends, it seems to me. Through all these years only one fellow quote took advantage unquote of me, as I recall, and I don't include Noel's [a former husband's] heisting our joint bank account. Otherwise those sweet, various alliances ended, for whatever reasons, with our continuing to be cheerful friends.

Clearly, for Mary and many of the other women in Hemingway's life, Ernest was no anti-feminine monster, as Bernice Kert has shown. But the various wives and lovers of Hemingway provide, in fact, only one key to understanding the man and his work.

In the case of *Hemingway: A Life without Consequences*, James R. Mellow finds a new pattern in the carpet, though it is woven out of some of the same sexual threads that have absorbed Hemingway's other biographers. It comes down to male bonding. Mellow distinguishes his work from that of his predecessors by highlighting

> Hemingway's lifetime dedication to male camaraderie, the male idylls of fishing and hunting expeditions that were always a necessary part of his life and well-being. In some ways, he was more demanding, more discerning—in his fiction, as well—about men than about women. A pattern was established: he needed to be the central figure in gregarious collections of male friends. . . .

Mellow's Hemingway had the "capacity for attracting male friends like a magnet in the midst of stray nails." And the book is festooned with photographs of Hemingway with groups of boys and then of men who formed one or another masculine circle. Some of them—like Morley Callaghan in *That Summer in Paris* (1963), Denis Brian in *The True Gen* (1988), and A. E. Hotchner in *Papa Hemingway* (1966)—wrote about what it was like to hang out with Hem. But there was also a large cast of shadowy men friends, many of them not writers, who for shorter or longer periods knew Hemingway closely and who enjoyed with him non-literary pursuits: the bar-hopping, the fishing expeditions, the skiing and hunting trips, the swapping of war stories over brandy and cigars. Mellow adds to our knowledge of Hemingway by identifying and making plain to us what Hemingway found in the companionship of Jim Gamble, Bill Smith, Charlie Hopkins, Carl Edgar, Bill Horne, Howell Jenkins, Chink Dorman-Smith, and so many others.

In his effort to create the special feeling associated with male camaraderie, Hemingway, Mellow argues, chose his men friends very carefully. Most of them were a few years older than he (as, by the way, were a number of Hemingway's wives and lovers). These men were generally less self-assured than he, and sometimes there was "some weakness in their character" or "some lack of self-worth." Even if older, they had to be ignorant of—or at least willing to take instruction in—hunting, fly-fishing, the caginess of bull elephants and wounded lions, or the finer points of taurine behavior. It was also necessary for Hemingway to appear to be the expert on what women want and on the sexual techniques that will satisfy them. Generally, the circle of Hemingway's male friends regarded

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him as a charismatic presence, a genuine hero, a brilliant talker, a great drinker, and a world-class sportsman. He flourished in such company. But he frequently dealt with his friends ironically and acerbically, or with condescension, perhaps because they allowed him to dominate them.

Of course Hemingway's macho posturing with his male friends, from the Twenties onward, had the effect of sustaining the rumor, circulated by enemies like Robert McAlmon and Zelda Fitzgerald, that Hemingway's masculinity was a doubtful proposition at best. Anyone who claimed to have that much hair on his chest might be a wee bit gay, mightn't he? And certainly a number of homosexual men were drawn to Hemingway. As Agnes von Kurowsky offhandedly remarked to Mary Welsh Hemingway, "You know how he was. Men loved him. You know what I mean." Hemingway had genuine affection —it is not too much to call it love—for a number of his male friends. But he was frankly repelled by homosexuals, rejected their advances, and shut off conversation about masculine friendship. In *The Sun Also Rises* there is this scene in which Bill Gorton says to Jake:

> "Listen. You're a hell of a good guy, and I'm fonder of you than anybody on earth. I couldn't tell you that in New York. It'd mean I was a faggot. That was what the Civil War was about. Abraham Lincoln was a faggot. He was in love with General Grant. So was Jefferson Davis. Lincoln just freed the slaves on a bet. The Dred Scott was framed by the Anti-Saloon League. Sex explains it all. The Colonel's Lady and Judy O'Grady are Lesbians under their skin."
>
> He stopped.
>
> "Want to hear some more?"
>
> "Shoot," I said.
>
> "I don't know any more. Tell you some more at lunch."
>
> "Old Bill," I said.
>
> "You bum!"

The problem of Hemingway's male characters is how to indicate friendship for each other without its being misconstrued as homosexual affection; and facetious verbal horseplay is the way out of an edgy situation where affection is sensed but the expression of it must be repressed. Mellow observes that "the great threat to these male rites [the fishing trips, the safaris, the drinking bouts] and male bonding—now a very trendy subject—was the taint or suspicion of homosexuality, about which Hemingway, from beginning to end, was rabidly outspoken." Homosexuality is invariably a profound evil in his fiction, though I have never understood whether Hemingway's view had a moral basis. Did Papa think of it as sterile or as subversive to rightly directed sexuality, which is procreative and life-affirming? In *A Moveable Feast*, Mellow reminds us, Hemingway records an episode in which Gertrude Stein appears to speak his mind in remarking that "the act committed by male homosexuals was 'ugly and repugnant,' and afterward the men were disgusted with themselves, took to drugs, and made frequent changes of sexual partners. Therefore, they were never happy with themselves." Whether Stein really thought this, or whether Hemingway put into her mouth "a few illuminating prejudices of his own," Mellow cannot say. But it is clear that Hemingway regarded with contempt the male homosexuals who crossed his path.

Yet Mellow remarks that Hemingway "was entirely comfortable with and intrigued by the lesbian relationships among his women friends, including Stein and Toklas, Janet Flanner, the pianist Renata Borgatti, etc." Intrigued Hemingway was. But I am not at all convinced that Hemingway was comfortable with it. In part, Hemingway's fascination with Gertrude Stein and other lesbians involved what they might be like with him as a sexual partner. In Stein's case, Hemingway was drawn to the older writer's "beautiful eyes and strong German-Jewish face," her "lovely, thick, alive immigrant hair," and those big breasts that—he told Hadley—"must have weighed ten pounds apiece." If, grotesquely, Hemingway wanted to bed Gertrude Stein, and he said he did, I

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suspect that the desire came out of literary competitiveness or the commonplace heterosexual belief that one can "turn" the homosexual toward normal sexuality. Hemingway seems to have been, in any case, incapable of looking at Stein in any other way. As Bernice Abbott once complained, Hemingway "looked at women only sexually, not as people." In the period between the 1920s and the writing of *A Moveable Feast*, however, Hemingway came to see the naïveté of his earlier sexual interest in Stein. For, in the passage I have just cited, he has Gertrude Stein go on to say that "in lesbian relationships, the opposite was true. The women 'do nothing that they are disgusted by and nothing that is repulsive and afterwards they are happy and they can lead happy lives together.'" It seems to me doubtful that Stein would have made so fatuous a remark. In any case, *A Moveable Feast* is meant to illustrate just its opposite: it leaves us with a chilling portrait of a Stein in humiliating bondage to her lesbian lover, Alice B. Toklas.

Yet is male bonding really Mellow's figure in the carpet? The fact is that Hemingway often broke off his male friendships, sometimes by performing an act so rude that it provoked the friend to call it off for him. It appears to be the case that Hemingway let very few men get close to him—at least for very long. Why—just a fear of being thought to be a homosexual? Aside from an ordinary natural desire for masculine company, especially in rough and risky outdoor activities, Hemingway's male friendships seem rooted in another desire that Mellow sketches in very delicately. These male friendships seem intended to re-create the Edenic world of sensuous pleasures such as Hemingway had known up in Michigan during his boyhood.

Male companions were important to this task but perhaps only as adjuncts, that is, as mere participants in a scene of action and adventure that Hemingway needed to construct and complete for his own purposes. We know that he exploited these scenes in his fiction; but perhaps, just as certainly, he needed them for obscure psychic reasons having to do with childhood gratifications that had been lost in his maturity. In the following canceled passage from "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick Adams recollects the summers he had spent with Bill Smith up in Michigan, where "all the love went into fishing and the summer":

> He had loved it more than anything. He had loved digging potatoes with Bill in the fall, the long trips in the car, fishing in the bay, reading in the hammock on hot days, swimming off the dock, playing baseball at Charlevoix and Petoskey, living at the Bay, the Madame's cooking, the way she had with servants, eating in the dining room looking out the windows across the long fields and the point to the lake, talking with her, drinking with Bill's old man, the fishing trips away from the farm, just lying around. He loved the long summer.

Bill Smith seems to have been important to the experience. (And certainly his importance is unquestionable in the literary re-creation of that summer in "The Three-Day Blow" and "The End of Something" in *In Our Time*.) But Bill Smith as such seems less important than the Edenic *Gestalt* of which he was a part. In fact, one could always find any number of Bill Smiths ready to drop everything and load up the rifles or trek into the interior where the fishing was good.

But if *men* most often served Hemingway in the re-creation of those early experiences of Edenic outdoor adventure, the problem is that there can be no Eden without an Eve. Consequently, even the women Hemingway chose, as Mellow rightly remarks, "had to be indoctrinated into this world of masculine pursuits." The nurse Agnes von Kurowsky, about whom Mellow has turned up interesting new information, dumped Hemingway before he could draw her into the outdoor life. (This rejection may have been the blow that soured Hemingway on the adequacy of *all* relationships.) His first wife, Hadley, was game, but she was pretty quickly preoccupied by maternal responsibilities with Bumby. (In "Cross-Country Snow," Nick Adams gets rather upset when his wife be-

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comes pregnant. "Maybe we'll never go skiing again, Nick," says his friend George. "We've got to," Nick says. "It isn't worth while if you can't.") Skiing, hiking, hunting, fishing, shooting—life isn't worthwhile if you can't do them when you want to. And what is a friend for—what is a wife or lover for—if not to provide company on the trail, or hip-deep in the water with the rod and reel, or stalking the big buffalo with the native boys and a 6.5 Mannlicher? Good sex with a woman is a Hemingway ideal, since the moment of ecstasy eclipses, however momentarily, one's consciousness of the *nada* at the heart of existence. But sex enmeshes the man, as well as the woman, in the biological trap. There are always complications, circumscribing consequences, in human relationships: Nick's wife is going to have a baby.

The Hemingway that we find in Mellow's biography wants to live a "life without consequences." The subtitle of the life is derived from "Soldier's Home" in *In Our Time*. Mellow identifies Hemingway with his character, the wounded Krebs, who has come home shattered by the war. Krebs is a man who wishes not to have, any longer, any close human involvements. He is distant from, even irascible to, his mother, father, and sisters, who expect him to carry on as if the war had never devastated his life. Krebs watches the young girls of the town walking along the other side of the street, yet he keeps his distance. He would like to have a girlfriend, Hemingway writes, but "he did not want to get into the intrigue and the politics. He did not want to have to do any courting. He did not want to tell any more lies. It wasn't worth it." Hemingway writes that Krebs "did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again. He wanted to live along without consequences."

Immersion in the active outdoor life of adventure was a way of more or less evading people, abandoning society, for more permanent and consequential matters: the direct engagement of the self with the order of non-human nature. Men were useful as friends, in this milieu, because, if carefully chosen, they did not muck things up by constantly intruding their emotions into the business at hand—angling, tracking, or bringing the lion into the cross hairs. And if they did talk too much, they were easier to shut up without wounded feelings. Men understood quicker that mouthing it up ruined any good experience. Friends and lovers —men and women—might come and go, in fact *would* come and go, but the edged encounter with a predatory lion in the tall grass or the pull of a six-hundred-pound marlin or a twenty-foot shark brought a man face to face with the existential human condition.

The direct engagement with non-human nature always interested Hemingway as much as people did; but natural conditions, paradoxically, were more reliable. People turned on you; they abandoned you; even if they said they loved you, they were still going to die and abandon you. "All stories, if continued far enough, end in death," Hemingway once said, "and he is no true story-teller who would keep that from you." In "In Another Country," the Italian major whose young wife has died tells Nick that a man should not marry. "If he is to lose everything, he should not place himself in a position to lose that. He should not place himself in a position to lose. He should find things he cannot lose." *The Sun Also Rises* appears to focus on the messy lives of the "lost generation"; but Hemingway told his Scribner's editor Max Perkins that "the earth abiding forever" was "the hero." People like Brett and Mike and Robert Cohn are the ephemeridae of existence, but what partakes of the abiding earth survives the transience of every human relationship. One of the key scenes of the novel occurs when Jake, Bill, and Robert Cohn descend from the Spanish mountains onto a plain where "there were trees along both sides of the road, and a stream and ripe fields of grain, and the road went on, very white and straight ahead. . . ." The landscape is beautiful, permanently so, as is the Cézanne-like style with which Hemingway renders it. But the important point is

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the wordless reaction of Jake and Bill: "I was up in front with the driver and I turned around. Robert Cohn was asleep, but Bill looked and nodded his head." A vision like that cannot be lost.

Likewise, in "Big Two-Hearted River," there occurs a scene which suggests Hemingway's need to have a "room" of his own, to be delivered, that is, from human entanglements.

> Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it.

Mellow's Hemingway wants a life like Nick's—a life lived "all the way up," but with a space free of the entanglements and consequences of human relationships, free even of the messy lives of those male companions to whom he was bonded but who so often took and drained and had no serious work to do. Despite his need for these boon companions, male or female, Mellow's Hemingway was, perhaps like every writer, a profound loner who didn't want to be touched. Only his art could finally matter.

Hemingway wanted his art to partake in that which survives the inevitable transience of human relations. Wanting to write well and truly about what really happened required him—like the matador Romero—to risk his life in holding "the purity of his line through the maximum of exposure," despite the horns of death bearing down upon him. Most of the time Hemingway failed. And Mellow finds "The Snows of Kilimanjaro"—with its embittered writer Harry—to be an allegory of Hemingway's sense of lost possibility and failed effort:

> only another writer, perhaps, would appreciate how close to the truth Hemingway had come to that sense of failed ambition and the terrible, fixed preoccupation, the irreducible selfishness of the writer's life; how the dogged practice of the craft takes hold—the time spent, the time wasted—with few things, other than war or marriage or a love affair, nearly as real or compelling or of more consequence than what was on the page in front of him.

But if Hemingway's later years were, with one or two exceptions, marked by wasted experience and failed stories, there are still those surviving masterworks that I have mentioned—visions of the way it was in a pure style that revolutionized modernist fiction. Hence, there is still that dried and frozen carcass of the leopard, up close to the western summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, a preserved once-living figure that nobody in the Modern Language Association seems able to explain. But Mellow's portrait makes a clear case, it seems to me, for Hemingway's having scaled a rather high point on the slopes of Parnassus.

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Poems *by Richard Tillinghast, Robert B. Shaw, David Wojahn, X. J. Kennedy & John Frederick Nims*

The way the petals fell

The way the petals fell
off the rose I took
(tidying the house we had lived in for a year)
from Julia's room,
the single rose, overblown, in its brass vase;

the way they landed, on that hideous
red wall-to-wall shag
carpet in the rented house—
one, then two discrete petals
creamy, and fragrant when sniffed

like the cheek of some superannuated aunt
proffered to be kissed,
the veined creaminess edged with blush—
those two petals, then four more: six
in all. A pattern: something

a tealeaf-reader would study
or a Taoist who augured
from the configuration of prayer beads
tossed ritually onto temple flagstones
how a day would run.

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It prefigured something—
auspicious I hoped, though
people don't come to me for augury—
for the journey we were cusping on:
One sea, one ocean, half a continent.

I gathered the petals (there being
six of us) in the palm of my hand,
freed the latch on the second-storey casement
and released them into the
August morning:

you and me
and our four—
hostages to gravity, all six.
I was almost afraid to look—
superstition I suppose—
as they navigated the air.

—*Richard Tillinghast*

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Old address book

Handily thumb-indexed, my alphabet
of friends with their out-of-date addresses
is something I thumb through with some regret.
Some of their whereabouts are simply guesses.

Erstwhile colleagues, classmates, confidants—
just when did they stop writing? And just why?
Caught in the listing of their former haunts,
it's more than memory, with a valiant try,

is able to retrieve. This couple split,
she has the children, he went—somewhere. Where?
(Some have dropped out in ways more definite,
leaving their lawn work to perpetual care.)

As to the few I hear from, I can see
in altered entries under every name
the upward trudgings of mobility.
Look at the moves it took to play the game:

the better neighborhood, the better job,
the better climate sirened them away,
taking a mere half-dozen years to rob
the ragged book of half its use. Today,

after I'd copied out the ones still good
I thought I would discard this now unneeded
dogeared directory. And so I should,
were I not stunned by all that's superseded.

—*Robert B. Shaw*

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Getting farsighted

The latest news from here?
Distance is wearing thin.
Far off is inching near,
and taps to be let in.

Road signs, once a blur,
have never been so bold.
The clock-thermometer
now beacons hot or cold

with punctual blatancy
from high atop the bank—
unwonted clarity
for which time is to thank.

Fine print, old intimate,
has grown standoffish, though;
held out at arm's length, it
repeats what I should know,

this line of Blake's: "The eye
altering alters all."
I peer up at the sky,
unlikely yet to fall,

but sagging here and there
as here and there change place.
Time's presbyopic stare
reorganizes space.

—*Robert B. Shaw*

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Photo of my father in a snowbound train

Now that his name has turned to elegy,
The drifts compose their inexact refrain,

As they did in Minnesota every January,
Less a music than a bone-white flurry

Of notes calling forth this slide show in my brain,
Where I watch his face turn to elegy,

Then turn away. The snow will drift and bury
Memory and every patch of ground. The Great Northern

Stalled en-route to Winnipeg, a January
Blizzard, '61. And here my father stays,

Long pulls from a bourbon flask, alone inside the engine.
The Empire Builder: its very name an elegy

To eras of diesel and steam. No clarity
To the slide: glint of the flask, a driftbound train,

Gray light of Minnesota January.
Erasure, erasure, visibility

Collapsed to zero. Just an arm now, lifting bourbon
To the disembodied mouth, this elegy

That was his name, blurring to infinity,
Lost in the blizzard's relentless implosions,

Lost to this Minnesota January,
Where his name has turned to snow, to elegy.

—*David Wojahn*

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Sharing the score

All through *Don Giovanni*, the lovers hold
The cumbersome score between them like a chart
To orchid-spattered islands drenched by storms,
Their fingers pacing to the music's pace,
Limning the legend, skimming note and bar,
As, naked, they might trace each other's forms.

Coughs from the curtained boxes, whispered words
Cannot distract this pair from their pursuit
Of paradise. Out of a fastfood bag
They share cold wurst. An orchard brewing fruit,
A paper harp to play glissandos on,
The score ordains the downfall of the Don.

To Mozart's mind, love hallows quenchless thirst.
Turning each page, intent, their fingers glance.
At last Don Pedro's stone shape rumbles in
To ask, "Is dinner ready yet?" Accurst
Hot hands jerk Giovanni down to Hell
And passion hurls them off to their hotel.

—X. J. Kennedy

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Julianne-julienne

Julianne of Norwich, julienne of leeks,
Is that our range of options here below?
To haunt the cloud where pure Enigma speaks
Words so occult they leave the night aglow?
Or to *bonne-bouche* it? Napery! Cuisine!
Diamonds on warm fingers by our own
Languid on stemware, tilted wine between
Blossomy kisses, and then—then!—fullblown

Rumplings of bedded pleasure. How compare
Norwich and leeks? Soul, body? Yet the two
In intimacy mingle. Though somewhat spare
In others, their very plenitude's in you,
My Julianne-julienne. Your body's droll
Gala mélange! What setting for a soul!

—John Frederick Nims

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Music

The new empty Glass

by Samuel Lipman

Some random thoughts of this operagoer, upon returning from a sold-out performance of *The Voyage*, the new Philip Glass opera, commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera to mark the discovery of the New World: *Where have you been?* Out. *What did you hear?* Nothing. *What did you feel?* Nothing. *How much did it cost?* A small fortune. *What did you see?* The latest glum chapter in the sad history of American opera. *Why did you go?* Hope springs eternal.

New-American-opera-wise, these have been a rich couple of seasons for the Metropolitan Opera. Last year, after years of ignoring the genre entirely, the Met produced John Corigliano and William M. Hoffman's *The Ghosts of Versailles*; the French Revolution having been paid its due (even if two years late), it was now the turn of the Met to honor Columbus. In the case of the Corigliano opera, the Hoffman libretto was an integral and even formative part of the work's conception; in the Glass opera, librettist David Henry Hwang, famous for his 1988 Broadway hit *M. Butterfly* (in the words of the program book for *The Voyage*, "a vividly theatrical chronicle of an affair between a polymorphously perverse Peking opera singer and a very confused French diplomat"), was relegated to writing what amounted to a short script, with the program making clear that the story of *The Voyage* was not by Hwang but by the composer himself.

As far as words and music are concerned, then, the evening was very much Glass's show. The "story" for which Glass took credit is a curious amalgam of science fiction and historical romance. The work begins with a prologue in which the center of attention is a wheelchair-bound scientist, modeled on Glass's friend the physicist (and best-selling author) Stephen Hawking. Suspended in the air, and assisted by a chorus, the Hawking look-alike speculates on the idea of exploration and its attraction for humans. Act I, which immediately follows, is set in a spaceship traveling through the universe around the time of the end of the earth's Ice Age. Members of the crew variously complain about their fate. A solar system looms up ahead; it seems habitable and is indeed populated by humanoids. The spaceship crashes into the earth, and the commander distributes the spaceship's directional crystals amongst the crew; when two of the crystals are united, the spaceship will be able to find the way back to its home planet. As the crew members investigate their surroundings and discuss what they have left behind, they are suddenly surrounded by a crowd of natives performing the Rite of Spring.

Act II begins with a scene in 1492 in the Spanish court at Granada. The Chorus and Queen Isabella urge Columbus on, promising him eternal honors. Suddenly the scene shifts, and Columbus appears on the deck of the *Santa Maria*. As he and his crew, besieged by various monstrous apparitions

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around and on top of them, seem to be losing heart, Isabella appears to encourage them; in the nick of time, land is sighted.

Act III presents us with a split stage. At its top is a space station in our solar system, containing a set of twins. At the bottom of the stage is a research laboratory, also containing a set of twins. The space twins speculate about the nature of space; the earth twins, both archeologists, bring together two of Act I's directional crystals, one found on a hike in the Andes, and the other on a dig near the Ganges. The combination of the crystals suggests the location of the planet from which the visitors in Act I came. Several years later, an expedition is about to leave for the newly discovered planet, the source of life. It is seen off by a group of dignitaries, including the Secretary General of the United Nations, the Prime Minister of the EEC, the President of North America, the Chancellor of the United States of Africa, the Chairman of IT&T, the Controller of the South American Monetary Fund, the Executive Vice President of Coca-Cola, the Emperor of China, and the Executive Director, World Environmental Council. As the dignitaries wave goodbye, they are set upon by a pack of young security guards, played by boys between the ages of eight and twelve, who assassinate their elders. Act III ends as each of the spaceship's crew bids farewell, via telephone, to what he has left behind. The opera itself closes with an epilogue, in which the dying Columbus is visited once again by Isabella, who attempts to seduce him. Undaunted, he refuses her offer, explaining that he prefers exploration to all her temptations. Finally, Columbus, still on his deathbed, rises transfigured to the stars. I might add that all this presumably high-minded but very real kitsch was expressed by the librettist in words laconic and finally appalling. As Columbus makes his ascent, the final lines of the opera are: "ISABELLA: Goodbye / Don Cristobal / Goodbye. COLUMBUS: Finally / We take the voyage / When the voyage / Takes us."

I can hardly say how the plot that I have just summarized would be perceived by a science-fiction fan. I am not such, finding in this literature as a whole an unpleasant combination of elements banal and terrifying, trivial and depressing. In *The Voyage*, I minded the invocation of Stephen Hawking in his wheelchair, because it seemed to me a confusion of abstract science and personal tragedy, and therefore a sentimental exploitation of Hawking's condition in the service of the most up-to-date intellectual fads.[1] At the end, I minded the particularly vulgar and campy treatment of a wildly gyrating Margaret Thatcher in the group of world leaders about to be executed; actually, until I was informed by those in the know, I thought the cavorting, leg-kicking aging woman dressed in bright blue was Queen Elizabeth, but I guess I should have known just who ranks higher on today's intellectual rub-out list. Elsewhere—between, as it were, the opera's beginning and its end—I found myself a bemused spectator at an artificial event, witnessing a meagre story, set to repetitive and faceless music, and over-produced within an inch of its life.

The Metropolitan, deeply aware that, in opera today, the spectacle's the thing, spent (according to *The New York Times*) two million dollars on the opera, of which $325,000 went for the commission, with the rest, one assumes, going for the production. The production was in the hands of the English controversialist David Pountney, who has performed such wonders of operatic life-saving surgery as supplying Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* with (what *Opera News* calls) "child abuse in a municipal park and the doubling of the Mother and the Witch." He has also set Bizet's *Carmen* in a Mexican auto graveyard—but then the English always have been fond of puns. Mr. Pountney, now coming to the end of a decade's service as director of productions at the London

1 I would assume, by the way, that Hawking was brought into *The Voyage* with his permission and perhaps even with his approval. If my assumption is true, it still does not change the character of the use that Glass made of this popular icon.

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Coliseum's English National Opera, is a veritable paragon of today's operatic producer as ruler of the audience roost. As the English critic Michael Kennedy (remarkably enough, given his current attention to Pountney, an authority on Elgar and Ralph Vaughan Williams) writes in the issue of *Opera News* coinciding with *The Voyage*'s première:

> Pountney boldy declared that he wanted the Coliseum to be renowned for its director's style of productions. He has achieved this ambition, even if some of his audiences would substitute "notorious" for "renowned." Critics found that, willy-nilly, they were devoting most of their reviews to the productions rather than to the singing, conducting and orchestral performance. As was right, Pountney established the style through his own productions, radical and inclined to the psychological, a treatment that became known as "Pountneyfication" when he tended to use the opera as a branch of sociology to teach the audience a lesson or to conduct an experiment in Jungian analysis on himself.

This lavish production, full (as is the wont at the Met these days) of people and objects swinging noiselessly across the top of the stage, was drawn, I suppose, from the detritus of the space-exploration movies of the past two decades and, especially, from the television program "Star Trek." Not for nothing did *New York* Magazine critic Peter Davis headline his scathing send-up of the opera "Star Drek." There were laser shows; a twenty-first-century Coke machine in the space station, contrasted with an old-fashioned Coke machine in the earth-bound archeological laboratory; numerous projections of the solar system and its constituents; fanciful costumes (by Dunya Ramicova, a long-time collaborator with Peter Sellars on his opera projects) harking back to "Flash Gordon"; and even a bit of cross-dressing, when one of the pair of plaid-skirted-archeologists turns out to have a very, very bass voice. I am told that while the Hawking cameo appearance was the composer's idea, to Mr. Pountney belongs the honor of fantasizing on stage the assassination of the world leaders.

What about the music that went with all this? Some critics (though by no means all), always on the lookout for an oasis in our current new-music desert, have found in this work a "new" Philip Glass: less repetitive, less bound to static hymn-book harmony, more able to write lyrical vocal melodies, and altogether properly willing to conform his own style to the awesome grandeur of what I suppose has to be styled GRAND OPERA at THE METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE. On the contrary, I found it the same old Glass. Accompaniment music below, accompaniment music on top, and nothing in the middle. Act II in particular is full of interminable sections—indeed, I think there is hardly anything else in the act—of scalic passages in the bass meandering underneath vocal lines that are no more than words given workaday and meaningless pitches. As always with Glass—and it is in fact his great stock-in-trade—there was nothing ugly, no dissonances to set one's teeth (or mind) on edge, just one harmonic pleasantry after another, spiced up a bit only by the usual minimalist device of repeated syncopated and consonant chords. There was no attempt that I could find to use music to delineate character, no attempt to use music to convey what the words say better than the words themselves can convey them. I need not say that, in this creative musical context, comments about the performers and their performances seem strangely irrelevant.

I do not think I am alone in saying that I found this performance the least involving evening I have ever spent in the theater. The audience, like the opera itself, seemed cool and uninvolved, unexcited during the intermissions, and eager to leave the house at the end; it gave no suggestion of even the possibility of a standing ovation for the performers. Despite the critics who found something good to say about Glass's supposedly newfound ability to write GRAND OPERA, the tone of the press was lukewarm to negative, finding the only bright spot in the fact that at

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least there was always something to see if not to hear.

What went so wrong? What was required of Philip Glass as composer on this occasion—and all the Pountneys in the world can do nothing to lift this burden from the composer's shoulders—was the creation, or rather the re-creation, of the Columbus myth for our time. It is surely no secret that neither Columbus nor the continent he discovered has a very good name these days. The celebration of the Columbus quincentenary, especially in the United States, where it ought to have reached its apogee, has been a colossal bust: even the celebrated appearance of the tall ships in the Hudson River on July 4, ballyhooed to the hilt, seemed tacky and ordinary. Elsewhere, everything about the discovery of America and its discoverer was reviled and mocked on every cultural, economic, and gender ground, and ultimately, perhaps mercifully, ignored. In his own way, Mr. Glass, in placing his hero in the context of a general human instinct to explore the unknown, attempted to ignore Columbus as a hero, as a man, and as an operatic character. In this, at least, he succeeded all too well.

But where Glass failed, I repeat, was as a mythmaker. When one thinks of the greatest operas of the past—those of Mozart and Beethoven, of Wagner and Strauss, of Verdi and Puccini—one thinks not of all the beautiful melodies they contain, not of all the numerous opportunities they provide for tragic or comic theater, not even of all the marvelous quasi-symphonic music with which they have enriched the orchestral repertory: one thinks of the myths they have created, or, as I said earlier, re-created, through their characters, which have so richly stocked civilization. Such is the achievement, among many others, of Mozart with libertinism and retribution in *Don Giovanni*; of Beethoven with freedom in *Fidelio*; of Wagner with the Nordic sagas in the *Ring*, Celtic legend in *Tristan und Isolde*, and the Grail in *Parsifal*; of Strauss with Greek antiquity in *Elektra*, the Bible in *Salomé*, and Vienna in *Der Rosenkavalier*; of Verdi with national independence in *Aida* and jealousy and hatred in *Otello*; and of Puccini with cultural conflict in *Madama Butterfly* and with Bohemianism in *La Bohème*. In all these great works, myths were either born or given new life; today, to think of Don Giovanni is to think of Mozart, to think of the Nordic gods is to think of Wagner, to think of Elektra is to think of Strauss. This is the highest achievement of opera; all the rest, I am tempted to say, is pleasing the public.

After this litany of almost inconceivable greatness, it is certainly unfair, and perhaps even ludicrous, to drag in Philip Glass. But so high has been his hype, so extravagant has been the praise he received after his initial success in *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), so great has been the number of his operatic commissions all over the world—he is now working on his *twelfth* opera, while *The Voyage* appears to be but his ninth—that a critic has no choice but to take him, if not at his own estimation, at least at that of others. And by choosing Columbus, with all of the implications he has as a subject for the discussion of modernity, the New World, and especially America, Glass himself has asked, or rather demanded, to be considered along with the masters.

And so the unpleasant question must be asked: why did he so fail? Of course the simplest answer is very likely the best: he is not a very good composer. Early in his career he found a manner—repetition of simple harmonies and sequences, to which he then yoked a penchant for using this limited material to clothe *tableaux* about such famous world-historical figures as Einstein, Gandhi, and Akhnaten. Doubtless all are great subjects, for great men, expressing great ideas, are always inexhaustibly fascinating. But great subjects cannot make anyone a better opera composer. Mr. Glass, because he links a lack of ability to write interesting pure music with a lack of ability to delineate character through music, simply is not fitted to the enormous task he has chosen, and which has been pressed on him with such alacrity by our culture-starved world.

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Art

On Hellenistic sculpture

by Beryl Barr-Sharrar

The Classical Greece of Johann Joachim Winckelmann was a utopian society where, through exercise, men acquired the same grand and manly contours, free of fat and flabbiness, that Greek sculptors gave their images, and citizens lived in political freedom in a temperate climate that encouraged an art of "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur." The harmony and beauty of Classical Greek sculpture was not just an aesthetic ideal for Winckelmann but the expression of a lost ethos, which artists of his day, he said, would do well to emulate if they aspired to produce works of true beauty.

The publication in 1764 of Winckelmann's history of ancient art, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, dispelled forever the Latin tradition of humanism in Germany and established a new concept. The high point of this new, true Hellenism was the period of Greek art between Periclean Athens and the death of Alexander the Great. After that, Winckelmann postulated, "the conception of beauty could be carried no further." For under the successors of Alexander (who died in 323 B.C.), Athenian art, "on which freedom had bestowed the gift of life, inevitably declined and fell with the loss of that freedom in the very place where it had flourished most."

After the exploits of Alexander the Great, Greek history became one of great kingdoms: Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt. While cities in this new expanded world were at first more or less democratic, increasing disparities of wealth, and eventually the influence of Rome, fostered increasingly oligarchic governments allowed varying degrees of autonomy by their monarchs. The democracy enjoyed by citizens of Athens and other Greek city-states around the Aegean was replaced by co-existence and cosmopolitanism over a vast area, with extensive intermingling of peoples and wide acceptance of the vernacular Attic *koinē* as common speech. Though artistic production continued in Athens, the more important centers now were Pergamon, Rhodes, Antioch, and Alexandria. Patronage was royal and ministerial, as well as civic and private, and the ruling elite apparently did not maintain the reverence for religious images that had effected artistic taste in the fifth century B.C. The artistic achievements of Greece survived, but in forms which selected and altered the forms of the Classical era.

In 1836, when the German historian Johann Gustav Droysen coined the word *hellenistisch* in his *Geschichte der Hellenismus*, the first history book to treat as a continuum the almost three centuries between Classical Greece and Roman domination of the eastern Mediterranean (definitive by 30 B.C.), the term had deprecatory implications. It meant not just late Greek, but "impure" Greek, because it described the learning and use of the Greek language and Greek ways of life by foreigners.

Except for the horses on the façade of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, it is unlikely that Winckelmann ever *saw* a Greek original.

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Like Goethe and Lessing, he never went to Greece, and, murdered in 1768 at the age of fifty, he did not live to see Lord Elgin's Parthenon marbles, on exhibit in London early in the next century. His chapters on the beauty of Greek sculpture and its stylistic evolution were written from his study of marble sculptures in Italian collections, many of which were recognized early in the nineteenth century as Roman copies or adaptations of Greek works (including some famous since the Renaissance like the *Apollo Belvedere*), and after his considerable mastery of ancient literary sources.

In his *Natural History* (34.52), the elder Pliny (23/24-79) abruptly ends his chronology of Greek sculpture with the 121st Olympiad (296-293 B.C.). In a much-quoted passage, he says the art of sculpture then ceased to exist, to be revived again only in 156-153 B.C.: *cessavit deinde ars ac rursus olympiade* CLVI *revixit*. Pliny was reflecting received opinion, probably representing the prejudice of an influential classicist, possibly the Greek neo-classical sculptor Pasiteles (*fl.* Rome *c.* 89 B.C.), who believed, apparently with most educated Romans, that the sculpture created during those 140 years after the Classical period could simply be dismissed as insignificant. Pliny resumed his history of art at more or less the time when classical-looking sculpture began to be widely produced, by imitation or mechanical copy, for Roman patrons familiar with Greek sculpture as a result of the widespread plundering of sanctuaries by victorious Roman armies.

Largely because Pliny's hiatus and the polemical judgment behind it has deprived the world of literary evidence for Greek sculpture of the third century through the first half of the second century B.C., neither Winckelmann nor the other great men of German culture of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries could truly evaluate, or even clearly identify, the sculpture that followed late Classical times.

Given the archeological discoveries and art-historical research since then, the historian Peter Green has no trouble identifying the art of the Hellenistic period. The scorn with which he describes and interprets it in his new book, *Alexander to Actium*, apparently springs from his deep disillusionment with the entire epoch.[1] Winckelmann, who disliked the work of Bernini, surprisingly praised and dated to the late Classical period even the *Laocoön*, the marble group of anguished Trojan priest and two sons struggling to free themselves from coils of deadly snakes. This is a work which has been considered in more modern times superbly characteristic of Hellenistic art (while recognized by all as a Roman copy, entirely or in part). Finding in the face and attitude of the priest "agony expressed without violence," Winckelmann believed the sculpture depicted a morally superior being struggling between his pain and the suppression of it, and that it had to represent, therefore, the preeminently *ethic* period of Greek history, the Classical. (This reading, contrasted by Lessing to Virgil's description in the *Aeneid* of the tormented, screaming *Laocoön*, provoked much elevated discussion in the eighteenth century.) Green sees the sculptural group strictly in the light of his interpretation of the Hellenistic period. After calling Winckelmann's admiration for the work "perhaps the most perverse judgment ever made on a work of art, and a jolting testimony to the subjectivism of an ideologically committed vision," Green continues with his *own* subjective view: "Muscles knotted and straining, face drawn into a rictus of pure agony, the Laocoön has always seemed to me a terrible symbol of Hellenistic civilization at its last gasp, caught inextricably in the viselike coils of a new world from which neither athleticism nor fine words could free it."

Ideological interpretations aside, the *Laocoön*, much admired by Michelangelo and lauded, studied, copied, and reproduced both in small scale and on medals and gems for several centuries after its discovery on the Esquiline in 1506, has suffered some aes-

1 *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age*, by Peter Green; University of California Press, 970 pages, $65.

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thetic devaluation since Winckelmann's day. (Though the first caricature of it, with apes, appeared as early as 1550, drawn by Titian.) But it still keeps German intellectuals busy; the most recent controversy about its origin and date has even been reported in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (May 27). Two of the most respected art historians in Germany have published differing views. For Bernard Andreae the *Laocoön* is a late Republican or early Imperial Roman copy of a bronze original that stood in 139 B.C. in the capital of the Attalid kingdom of Pergamon (in modern Turkey); for Nikolaus Himmelmann it is an entirely eclectic Roman creation of Claudian-Neronian times, representing various Hellenistic sculptural notions.

As might be expected from their documented preference, the Romans copied and adapted fewer works from the Hellenistic period than from the Classical. Nevertheless, modern knowledge of Hellenistic sculpture is based mostly on copies, with the notable exception of monuments like the *Melian Aphrodite* (better known as the *Venus de Milo*), the *Nike of Samothrace*, and the colossal *Great Altar* from Pergamon, all discovered and excavated in the last century, as well as some other original Hellenistic marble statuary and reliefs, and small works in bronze and clay.

Regardless of the mistakes in dating to which Winckelmann's ideology led him, his belief in the virtually exclusive high worthiness of art from the Classical period has had a long-lived effect. (He perceived Archaic art as an imperfect striving toward the Classical achievement.) As recently as 1933, when the German art historian Margarete Bieber took her examination in Greek sculpture at Oxford, the material she was required to know stopped at 330 B.C.

Peter Green devotes three of the seventeen chapters in his book on the Hellenistic Age to art. They are based on the three divisions of time commonly used by art historians, the initial chapter beginning, however, at 380 B.C. to encompass antecedents from the late Classical period (for Winckelmann, the time of the most sublime sculpture) rather than at a point during the life of Alexander the Great or with his death. Middle Hellenistic art is usually considered that of the established kingdoms (270-150 B.C.), ending with the sack of Corinth by Mummius (146 B.C.) and the bequest to Rome of the Pergamon kingdom by Attalus III (133 B.C.). This is followed by the intrusion, then dominance, of Rome with the defeat, by the future Augustus, of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium in 30 B.C. In his preface, Green acknowledges the reading and annotating of his chapters on art by Andrew Stewart, whose views on the sculpture of the Hellenistic period as presented in his eloquently written and learned new book on Greek sculpture are considerably more sympathetic than Green's.[2]

While it might be said, in the spirit of Winckelmann, that the fourth-century B.C. sculptors Lysippos and Praxiteles added "that grace which gave perfection to Greek art" (and enlivened the self-contained High Classical image), sculpture after the Classical epoch did not develop in any *evolutionary* way. Attempts earlier in this century to organize the heterogeneous sculpture of the Hellenistic period by stylistic phases have proven controversial and unreliable. It seems apparent now that stylistic differences in the Hellenistic period should be considered in terms of the expansion of artistic language, not consistent development. Despite the problems of dating, the few originals and the many Roman copies of works placed today by most scholars within the roughly 140 years which Pliny chose to ignore are considered those most representative of Hellenistic sculpture.

By this time in history, sculptors had achieved advanced technical means in bronze casting as well as marble carving, and marble sculpture had been largely freed from the restrictive frameworks of architecture. The human image could be depicted with greater naturalism. Figures were frequently con-

2 *Greek Sculpture: An Exploration*, by Andrew Stewart. *Volume I: Text*, 380 pages. *Volume II: Plates*, unpaged. Yale University Press, $100 the set.

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ceived in groups, sometimes heroic (mythological groups, like the so-called *Pasquino* [Menelaos with the body of Patrokles], or commemorative, like the so-called *Ludovisi Group*, a defeated Gaul committing suicide after killing his wife); often less heroic (wrestling athletes and playful Dionysiac figures, maenads pushing away advancing satyrs or groups of dancing satyr and seated nymph). This is the period of the erotically charged *Barberini Faun* (acquired in the nineteenth century by Ludwig I of Bavaria for Munich's Glyptothek), the sleeping *Hermaphrodite*, the bronze *Sleeping Eros* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (never so well displayed as in the recent Mantegna exhibition, where it helped suggest the sculpture collection in Isabella d'Este's *studiolo*), and children in various mock-heroic poses, depicted realistically rather than as miniature adults as in Classical art. Carefully observed old men and women are also among the so-called "genre" figures assumedly created for votive purposes and placed in sanctuaries: the *Old Market Woman* in the Metropolitan Museum wears her best dress and an ivy wreath on her head en route to a festival of Dionysos. The human figure was much less often representative of an abstract, quasi-Platonic ideal than in the Classical period, and was considerably less restrained. Now it acted as a vehicle for an idea that was often complex, by no means always exalted, frequently expressed with pathos, sometimes rendered in parody (occasionally biting), sometimes playful (even entertaining).

The Hellenistic period was one of important innovation. Public, honorific statues of rulers, prominent politicians, philosophers, and poets were widely produced during this time, and, perhaps directly related to this phenomenon, portraiture became more sharply individualized. With its "discovery" as early as the fifteenth century, the extensive figural language developed in the sculpture of the early and middle Hellenistic periods—with all its carry-over from the Classical period—became the basis of much subsequent Western sculpture. The considerable influence of Dionysiac and genre sculpture on sixteenth-century artists like Sansovino, as well as on neo-classical artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sometimes via works of the High Renaissance, is perhaps not always felicitous to modern eyes, especially in comparison to the great vitality of the Hellenistic prototypes. Less obvious influences like those of Hellenistic standing figures of orators or philosophers (probably in Roman portrait copies) on images of prophets by Ghiberti and Donatello, or the Hellenistic posturing children on small bronzes by Donatello, are probably more in conformity with contemporary taste. Other sculptural achievements of the Hellenistic period survived in the Western tradition not only in the resolution of body types (as well as body conditions: youth, old age, the infirm, etc.) but also in the representation of states of mind through gesture and expression. Bernini may have been the only one to carry that tradition further until Rodin, who might be said to have marked its end.

It is a mistake to think of "Hellenistic" as a monolithic style. Very different sculptural styles existed simultaneously in this long period of ancient art history. Besides the innovative "baroque" style for epic or heroic themes, and the greater realism of the so-called genre, classicism continued on some levels, and there was also an "archaistic" current. In his excellent new handbook on Hellenistic sculpture, R. R. R. Smith organizes this difficult and confusing material by category of subject, a clear-headed approach which de-emphasizes the traditional problems of dating.[3]

Green consistently measures Hellenistic sculpture by fifth-century B.C. traditions, as Winckelmann might have done had this body of work been sorted out (and discovered) by his time. But Green *exposes* the new subjects and styles as manifestations of what he understands as the corruption, elitism, and venality of the social and political order of the time. Though he sees the

3 *Hellenistic Sculpture*, by R. R. R. Smith. World of Art Series. Thames & Hudson, 287 pages, $12.95 paper.

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(considerable) human dignity expressed in the suicidal Gaul, more important to him is its "profoundly unclassical" effect and what he wishes to reveal as "the beginning of that long, frequently disastrous, at times ridiculous obsession with earthy, primitive, peasant values that has bedeviled urban intellectuals down the ages" (citing Lawrence's gamekeeper Mellors and Kazantzakis's Zorba). What Green himself calls in a footnote the "striking emotional range and variety" of the Gigantomachy frieze on the outside of the podium of the *Great Altar of Pergamon* (in Berlin) is to him also clearly secondary. A learned work, incorporating many references to earlier style and iconography, the frieze depicts, in high relief and in a showy, even rhetorical, display of virtuoso marble carving, an implicit allegory of the defense of Greek civilization by Greeks: a battle between massive figures of the Olympian gods who move with broad, often extravagant, gestures and sweeping drapery (but with Classically calm demeanor), and equally impressive winged or snake-legged Giants who struggle and grimace when attacked—like *Laocoön* in (silent) pain. Green writes as if describing the wrathful in the fifth circle of Dante's *Inferno*: ". . . the crimp and strain of knotted muscles, huge, lumpish wrestlers snorting and heaving, faces set in the rictus of rage or agony" and, he continues ". . . at almost unbearable length, we are confronted with pain, hatred, frenzy, berserk physical outrage." Ultimately, there are, again, important political overtones: "Those who hired mercenaries to do their fighting for them clearly needed some surrogate." He accepts the dynamic and baroque *Nike of Samothrace* because it represents "the prowess of victory" (rather than peace associated with wealth and profit) and because he believes it may have been made by a Rhodian at a time (early second century B.C.) when Rhodes was a free and independent naval republic: "The Rhodians, at least, were prepared to man their own ships."

Perhaps one of the most important innovations of the Hellenistic era, both artistically and socially, was the naked, or near-naked, Aphrodite. Green acknowledges the fact that "heterosexuality . . . came into its own from the fourth century onward" and finds the late-second-century B.C. partially draped *Melian Aphrodite* "an indubitable masterpiece." Alas, however, he does not discuss the historical importance of the artistic innovation represented by this classicizing work. Beginning with Praxiteles' completely naked *Knidian Aphrodite* in the middle of the fourth century B.C., the depiction of the female body, nude or half-draped, was a function of the emergence of a new male erotic ideal. This heterosexual ideal, in turn, reflected nothing less than a fundamental change in the status of women and their increasing social prominence, prominence expressed also by the greater number of portrait statues of women. While in his handbook R. R. R. Smith devotes several pages to this important phenomenon, what Green finds significant in these Aphrodites is merely the progressive secularization of Hellenistic art. "The dominant ideal was sensuous gratification," he writes. "We find an increasing emphasis on the private, domestic haven, the semidetached world of blank courtyards turning its back on the public male involvement of the agora. Political despair or indifference is breeding a new concern with familial values." He disdains the new Hellenistic "quasi-rococo awareness of children": "Now, by no accident, sculpture . . . displays a preoccupation with children—and, in particular, with Eros as the formalized link between passion and its natural end product."(!) The sensuality he sees in a group of youthful *Eros and Psyche* elicits the parenthetical remark, "child molesting child"; to the Dionysiac groups of satyr and nymph (an old theme on Greek vase painting, new only in the Hellenistic period to sculpture) he responds: "Ripeness is all."

Elsewhere, he deplores the "feminine element" emergent in the softening of male nudes ("the concept of the hermaphrodite . . . would seem its logical conclusion") and, surely without intention, evokes Winckel-

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mann's admiration for the well-contoured free man. The "mood of sensitive introspection" in Hellenistic statues of young men "sets them in sharp contrast to the magnificent, bearded, heroic fifth-century warriors of Riace Marina, the embodiment of self-confident masculinity, with their heavy musculature and great, firm, rounded buttocks," whom he associates with "the citizen-soldiers of a genuinely independent *polis*." On the other hand, the male statues of poets, thinkers, and private individuals don't count. They are "the uninvolved, the nonpublic, the uncommitted" (and are usually clothed and sometimes seated): a manifestation of the collapse of the city-state ideal. Green's interpretive vision is no less "ideologically committed" than Winckelmann's.

Throughout, Green's interpretations of the art of the period are deeply colored by his impatience with the Hellenistic world at large. It suits him that Hellenistic artists *might* have painted still lifes (though our Roman copies may represent only details of Hellenistic paintings), for such a thing represents the "total and delectable rejection of all social awareness." Even the jewelry of the Hellenistic period displays "self-indulgence as a classic substitute for power." Green's brilliance and verbal facility are everywhere in the service of a political polemic. At no point does the reader have the impression that he draws close to a work of art to look at it objectively; he certainly cannot *enjoy* it, for that would be to embrace the immorality and decadence which, for him, dominated the Hellenistic epoch.

There are indeed examples of Greek sculpture as early as the late second century B.C., perhaps all commissioned by non-Greeks, that show signs of debilitation. On the other hand, the tough, unadorned realism of the portraiture by Greeks from the same period and some decades later, mostly of Romans, is, at its best, a high point in the history of the artistic study of human personality. Green judges the subjects of the portraiture harshly, coloring the works of art. The famous *Bronze Head of a Frowning Man* from Delos is, for him, "the epitome . . . of agonized sensibility bankrolled by a large private income."

In her recent book on Hellenistic sculpture, Brunilde S. Ridgway proposes suspending all received ideas of the historical period in order to base a view of its sculpture "on factual evidence first." [4] Her book deals with sculpture from 331-200 B.C., ending at a historically arbitrary date in order to avoid the superimposition of ideological meaning. Readers of Green's book who wish a greater understanding of the sculpture of the Hellenistic period might wish to supplement the author's highly interpretative readings with the more objective and appreciative views of Stewart, Smith, or Ridgway.

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4 *Hellenistic Sculpture 1: The Styles of ca. 331-200 B.C.*, by Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway; University of Wisconsin Press, 405 pages, $40.

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Theater

Theater of academe

by Donald Lyons

David Mamet should have called his short new play, now at the Orpheum, *Office Hours* instead of *Oleanna*, which is, apparently, a pointless allusion to an old Utopian community. It takes place in a bleakly functional faculty office that is furnished with—no, that *is*—a wooden desk, two chairs, and a sort of bench. It has the spare, stark, penitential look of such places. John, a professor of education or psychology or sociology (the vagueness here is a weakness, as we shall see), is coping with student Carol, who fears she is not succeeding in the course. Also, she wants her paper re-evaluated. Her line in argument —"I have to pass"; "I read your book"; "I did what you told me"—will be familiar to anyone who has ever taught. But Carol, with her horn-rims, ankle-length brown shift, and rigid postures of strain and pain, seems dour and troubled beyond the norm. "Am I stupid?" she asks. "Everything I do is garbage." Her plight solicits, or at any rate exacts, from John a response that becomes personal in timbre: "I talk to you as I talk to my son. . . . I like you." "Why would you want to be personal with me?" she whines—rather oddly, since she has been so personal in reference to herself. Her seeming torment leads the nervously chain-smoking John into self-deprecating and situation-easing patter. He doubts the value of teaching. He says, "Tests are not a gauge of your intelligence; they are garbage; they are a joke." Carol seems not at all eased by this glib relativism; she jots down each word fiercely in a large notebook, while monotonously insisting, "I want to know about my grade." "Your grade," impulsively offers John, "is A if you come back and meet me; we'll break rules." "Why would you do this for me?" "Because I like you." He tells a mildly ribald joke and puts his arm consolingly around her. Throughout this first scene, John is engaged in constant, but interrupted, phone chatter with his wife, who is agitated about a private school for their son and about complications arising in their purchase of a new house, a purchase contingent on his imminent acquisition of tenure. Mamet loves to write the verbal hiccoughs of these one-sided phone conversations; and he knows his real-estate patter, as *Glengarry Glen Ross* so copiously illustrated.

In *Oleanna*'s second scene, Carol, suddenly metamorphosed into an outraged and articulate ideologue, sits inquisitorially in judgment upon John. She has in the meantime lodged against him a successful charge of sexual harassment, cunningly misusing the dialogue and behavior of the first scene; his tenure has been revoked and he is about to be dismissed. Brandishing notebook and pencil as weapons, Carol repeats John's unwise remarks and construes them as harassing, patriarchal, etc. He smokes and stutters and squirms and begs and at last grabs her pleadingly. By the third scene, wearing a severe power suit in gray, she speaks of "my group" and "my lawyer"; she has escalated her charges to attempted rape, based upon

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the grab. And, what is more, Carol now claims to represent not only an offended gender but a sneered-at class; John's high-handedness about grades and other academic rituals outraged her working-class earnestness about her hard-earned college education. John whines about his ruined life. Carol offers a way out: remove from the course reading list a number of books (including John's own) that "the group" finds objectionable, and the charges will be withdrawn. This blackmail puts some spine into John ("You want to burn my book you go to hell . . . you think you can come in here with your PC and destroy my life you little cunt") but also, alas, drives him to an act of violence. The end.

Oleanna seems written for the sake of its last two scenes of confrontation, and it does have a certain neatness of construction. Those scenes are, of course, totally improbable on a naturalistic level. Harassees who've filed charges surely don't return for tête-à-têtes with their victimizers. Such a violation of realistic decorum would be unexceptionable, of course, if Mamet had a real artistic point to make. But finally it is just an excuse, an occasion for another of his trademark, edgy, ready-to-snap, in-your-face explosive arguments. Mamet can do these scenes in his sleep; they are tunes he can finger with ease. But, to pursue the musical metaphor, he is more orchestrator than composer. His themes, his issues, seem secondary to the rhythms. As for *Oleanna*'s issues, I'm inclined to sympathize with Carol, although I doubt Mamet means me to. I do not, however, mean I sympathize with her sexual harassment charge. That charge is, on the evidence of the first scene, a neurotic misreading of John's linguistic and gestural behavior, and, on the evidence of the third scene, a malicious stratagem in a PC thought-control agenda. On this Mamet is unequivocal; like Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, *Oleanna* is a melodrama of false accusation. But Carol has, I think, a case about John's notions of education. Whatever his subject exactly *is*, he and Carol are seen discussing the ritual significance of hazing. And as soon as he misreads her earnest questions as a programmatic challenge from a representative of the "young," he abandons, in the spirit of the boot-licking 1960s, the very ground of his discipline. Of course, as we all know, he glibly proffers, education is classist, testing is futile, structures of learning should be trashed. Sensing a "radical" critique, he caves in, ceding the moral and pedagogic terrain. He behaves, in a word, like a classically self-doubting liberal. It is a superb irony that *this* challenger *craves* the very structures he airily forgoes and chooses to read his "hip prof" transgressions of the student/teacher distance as criminal offenses. Or rather it would be a superb irony, a genuinely Shavian irony, if one could be confident that Mamet intended it at all. And since it gets no kind of articulation, I conclude he did not. The message I took away from *Oleanna* is that serious pedagogy should involve the transmission of real learning (not of fashionable or made-up subjects) in clearly structured ways by and to people who love knowledge. Such *paideia*, such structures, such love are academe's surest defense against the ideological terrorisms of yesterday and today and tomorrow. And yet something tells me that this uncovering of the face of Allan Bloom behind the mask of David Mamet amounts to what another Professor Bloom might call misreading.

Mamet has directed *Oleanna* himself, in the tense, snappish way the material wants. It is not boring. Rebecca Pidgeon did not, I think, find a way to fuse Carol's early simpering stupidity (she does not know what "paradigm" means) with her later Torquemada-like ferocity. She played both aspects toughly and uncompromisingly and well, but the two stayed out of focus. For them to coalesce, be it said, the actress would have had to supply what the script did not. William H. Macy is a terrific actor and a Mamet veteran (he was Joe Mantegna's partner in the Mamet film *Homicide*). Here as John he gets all the eagerness, decency, and befuddled confusion of the man without soliciting pity (in this he is the polar opposite of Jack Lemmon in the recent film of Mamet's *Glen-*

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garry Glen Ross). Macy makes visible the potentiality of a fuller and more thought-through play in this material.

While Mamet can occasionally be funny, his warmest admirer could never call him a wit. Simon Gray's failing (and what an amiable one) is an excessive fondness for wit. *Oleanna* is reminiscent of Gray's 1971 play, *Butley*, also set in a faculty office and dealing with the disintegration of a teacher. *Butley* is, for good and bad, everything *Oleanna* is not. Ben Butley teaches English literature at London University, smokes and drinks to excess as his personal life collapses (wife and lover leave him) and bewildered students pop in and out pleading in vain for essay assignments. Wit is Butley's never-lowered sword in his battle against entropy. The scene where Miss Heasman, described (in 1971, please remember) as a "pretty, competent-looking girl," reads her paper on *A Winter's Tale* to a dozing Butley ("I'll tell you what, as our time together's drawing to a close, read the last two or three sentences, so we can get the feel of your conclusion") seems like a devil's parody of *Oleanna*, as does the final scene where Butley decides he can't be bothered seducing a (male) student.

While Gray's wit can serve as a prophylactic against Mametian earnestness and bullishness, it can also become an indulgence, a facile cynicism, a fig leaf for male-menopausal self-pity. If *Butley* lurched alcoholically in that direction, *The Holy Terror* topples all the way over. *The Holy Terror* is Gray's latest reworking of an earlier piece about the long, self-destructive decline of a London publisher and was recently performed at the Promenade Theatre under Gray's own direction. In its hero, Mark Melon, we see, even more awfully than in Ben Butley, the ashes of idealism. Here, as in Gray's *The Common Pursuit*, publishing is an extension—and betrayal—of academic dreams. A boy wonder in publishing, Melon took over a small, "toney" house only to shunt aside a beloved old editor's Yeats/Pound project in favor of a book on masturbation, to exploit a young secretary's need for help on a paper about *Twelfth Night* in order to seduce her, to contemn old college pals' proposals for plays in blank verse and epics in Scots in favor of a voluptuous authoress's novels about bondage. At home, he persecutes his wife for having a (nonexistent) lover and snarls at his son. He is, in short, a consummate swine and barbarian kept going by a nasty wit and black ink at the publishing house. When the wit turns to incoherent odium and he alienates successful authors, Melon loses job and family, winding up as the plaything of a pair of greedy psychiatrists fond of electroshock "therapy." Gray has this time written a much darker *Butley*. Wit has become in *The Holy Terror* an emblem of moral nihilism, of claustrophobic self-hatred, of, finally, madness. The flavor is Swiftian. In the play, all voices are subordinate to the mad monologue of the hero. And yet, for all Gray's pitiless capture of the range of male insult and male exploitativeness, there is something close to fondness in the grimly diagnostic but covertly complaisant portrait of Melon.

Melon was intelligently acted by Daniel Gerroll, whose youthful, yuppie glamour gave us the successful Melon first and then took us gradually, and frequently hilariously, through the circles of the character's inferno. The play's framing device—the post-asylum Melon telling his life story to a suburban women's club—was a clumsy and awkward one, and it was a measure of Gerroll's surefootedness in the role that he avoided the lurking self-pity in these moments. Some reviewers thought Gerroll too young and elegant for Melon, but it was in fact more interesting watching a Gore/Quayle type implode than, say, a Mailer type.

Mamet and Gray can, crudely, figure as allegorical antitheses: hyperbolic intellect against hypertrophied emotion; defensive British sarcasm versus offensive American obscenity. Where Mamet confronts in impoverished dialogue, Gray amuses in florid monologue. And in both, women are essentially noises off; though the noises may be changing, they are still there *for* the hero to react to.

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Fiction chronicle

Literature & revolution

by Bruce Bawer

Paul Auster and Don DeLillo, to whom he has dedicated his new novel, *Leviathan*, share more than a friendship.[1] Both have been celebrated as bleak, cerebral visionaries; both are preoccupied with the surprising patterns of connection and correspondence that underlie the world's supposed chaos; both share a fascination with language and a penchant for name games. But there is a dramatic difference between the two. Auster is one of our finest novelists: in his most recent novels, *Moon Palace* (1989) and *The Music of Chance* (1990), he brilliantly captures the way in which life, though seemingly random, proves to be shot through with startling similitudes; in these books, truth is uncovered with difficulty and in stages, and invariably proves to be extraordinary. Yet extraordinary though it is, that truth is never quite unbelievable. Proceeding step by step from the familiar to the outlandish, Auster makes one believe even as one marvels; and he makes one feel both exhilaration and distress as his characters become gradually aware of their confinement in a prison of patterns, aware of the apparently magical bonds that underlie their key relationships and that have covertly predetermined their major decisions.

Auster's vision is of a world penetrated by coincidence, a world where chance occurrences can change a life, a world where everyone—even the most solitary of individuals—is in reality an unknowing element of some overarching design. If in his early novels Auster conveys this vision in ways that often seem contrived and pretentious, so that he can appear interested chiefly in drawing attention to his own cleverness, in his later fiction Auster becomes increasingly good at drawing the reader in on a human level, at making his vision *felt*.

In DeLillo's less accomplished but more celebrated novels, by contrast, while there is much talk of the world's confining systems and structures, there is very little of Auster's suspense, his gradually escalating sense of dread and panic and wonder. One problem with DeLillo is that he depicts this confinement not as an abiding human reality but as a circumstance peculiar to contemporary America, with the result that one after another of his novels comes down, thematically, to a single message that is as tiresome as it is politically correct: namely, that we live in an inhuman, assembly-line consumer culture, a land of cliques, cabals, cults, conspiracies, computer systems, and corporate bureaucracies. To be sure, DeLillo's preoccupation with the question of national identity places him in good company: since the Republic's early days, many novelists have felt compelled to reflect upon the question of who we Americans are and of what distinguishes us from our Old World cousins, so that in many a would-be Great American Novel the mysteries of the human condition have seemed almost ancillary to the Amer-

1 *Leviathan*, by Paul Auster; Viking, 275 pages, $21.

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ican enigma. Even Auster has made considerable thematic use of America and its history: Hiroshima and Apollo 11 figure prominently in *Moon Palace*; *The Music of Chance* features an ironic reference to "America . . . home of the goddamn free." But in those books the American mystery is only a facet of life's mystery; the limitations of American freedoms are only an instance in the limitations of life's freedoms. DeLillo, by contrast, has often seemed to be concerned more with the parochial than with the eternal, more with the making of sociopolitical statements than with the making of art, his novels tending less toward the complex and penetrating artistry of, say, Henry James's *The American* than toward the facile fatalism of Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*. (Indeed, in the age of Mailer, it has sometimes seemed that the sole universally recognized mark of a serious American novelist is the tiresome persistence with which his novels insist upon the failure of the American dream and the corruption of the national destiny.)

What compounds the failure of DeLillo's fiction is that his would-be vision of life never comes *to* life: his characters remain stubbornly one-dimensional, and consequently one can't believe in or care about their entrapment in technological or corporate or bureaucratic mazes. Whenever one of them makes a speech about "[t]he networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies" or suchlike (to quote an ironic celebration of bank machines by the protagonist of DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*), it invariably sounds glib and heavyhanded, and one never feels as if the voice is that of anyone other than DeLillo. If one emerges from an Auster book, then, feeling that its author is profoundly gripped by, and has succeeded in communicating, a distinctive vision of life, one emerges from a DeLillo book feeling that he has been struggling to impress one with a modishly grim picture of contemporary America that he may well credit in some superficial, intellectual way, but that does not possess him at any deep level.

The good news about *Leviathan* is that in many ways it does recall Auster's own best books; the bad news is that it also reminds one very much of DeLillo. In fact, alongside *Moon Palace* and *The Music of Chance*, *Leviathan* seems less pure and passionate, more facile and familiar; its title even sounds like something DeLillo might have come up with. A leviathan is a sea-serpent; the word appears several times in the Bible and, in that most American of American novels, *Moby-Dick*, is frequently used by Ishmael in his discourses upon the various kinds of whales. *Leviathan* is also, of course, the title of the 1651 classic in which Thomas Hobbes characterized the British Empire as a proud serpent, a "political organism," and thereby gave the word an additional meaning: "a bureaucratic, totalitarian state."

This is plainly the meaning that Auster has in mind here: for his *Leviathan* is the story of a brilliant New York writer named Ben Sachs who—born the day the A-bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, devoted to Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience," obsessed with American history, and gifted (or plagued) with an "attitude of remorseless inner vigilance"—quits writing to become a terrorist. Calling himself "The Phantom of Liberty," he travels around the country exploding Statue of Liberty replicas in town squares and parks around the U.S. and leaving notes demanding that Americans practice the democracy they preach. The novel's narrator, Peter Aaron, makes it clear at the outset that his friend Sachs has recently died in an explosion in Wisconsin and that he, Aaron, is rushing to complete his chronicle of Sachs's life before the FBI puts the big pieces of that life together and comes to Aaron to fill in the details.

Aaron—whose similarity to Auster extends beyond the initials of their names (like his creator, Aaron spent some years in France during his youth; the title of his novel *Luna* recalls that of *Moon Palace*; the name of his second wife, Iris, is an anagram for the given name of Auster's wife, the writer Siri Hustvedt)—tells us that he met and befriended Sachs when they were both young writers,

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not long after the publication of Sachs's promising first novel. That novel, *The New Colossus* (whose title, of course, is taken from Emma Lazarus's poem about the Statue of Liberty), sounds in Aaron's description rather like E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*. Informed by the conviction that America had lost its way since Thoreau's death, *The New Colossus* is set in the nineteenth century; its cast includes both historical figures (among them Ralph Waldo Emerson and Sitting Bull) and borrowed fictional characters (Huck Finn, Raskolnikov, Ishmael). Many years after writing *The New Colossus*, Sachs began, but never completed, a second novel, *Leviathan* (in tribute to which Aaron has named his own book); but he spent most of his career as a writer of opinion pieces.

That career ended with a near-fatal fall from a Brooklyn fire escape on the hundredth anniversary of the Statue of Liberty. The fall shook Sachs's composure, and he moved to the Vermont countryside, where in a chance back-road encounter he was forced to kill a gunslinging stranger in order to save himself; in a typical Auster coincidence, the stranger proved to be none other than Reed Dimaggio, the estranged husband of one Lillian, the bosom buddy of Sachs's New York friend Maria, who had inadvertently caused his fire-escape accident. After learning that Dimaggio had written a doctoral dissertation on the anarchist Alexander Berkman and had then become a terrorist himself, Sachs decided to pick up where Dimaggio had left off; thus was born the "Phantom of Liberty." Sachs later explained to Aaron that he wanted to "redeem" himself, to "take a stand for what I believed in, to make the kind of difference I had never been able to make before. All of a sudden, my life seemed to make sense to me."

Aaron sums up Sachs's story thusly: "In fifteen years, Sachs traveled from one end of himself to the other." Such a journey—from familiar psychological territory to borderlands that seem utterly alien—is at the center of most of Auster's novels. So is the juxtaposition of intellectual and physical activity: here, as ever, Auster wants us to contemplate the relation—moral, metaphysical, and otherwise—between literature and activism, between someone who travels to a different part of himself by writing works of fiction and someone who does so by driving back and forth across the country (a familiar motif in Auster's novels) to commit acts of violence. Aaron says that Sachs, when recounting his career as the Phantom of Liberty, "talked with the assurance of an artist who knows he has just created his most important work"; toward the novel's end, Sachs pays Aaron a compliment that sounds backhanded: "I admire you for your innocence, for the way you've stuck to this one thing [i.e., writing] for your whole life." What, Auster is asking, is the connection between literary creation and political action? Is an author's highest obligation to art or to social justice? Where does true innocence lie? (Who, after all, but a quintessential—if mad—American innocent would become the Phantom of Liberty?)

There's a lot of talk here about the relation of words and actions, and particularly about the power of writing to generate an illusion of reality. "Without even knowing it," Aaron tells us, "I enter the lives of strangers, and for as long as they have my book in their hands, my words are the only reality that exists for them." Sachs brags to Aaron that "I make up stories about my imaginary conquests, and Fanny [his wife] listens. It excites her. Words have power, after all." Written words play a major role in the plot: Aaron decides to become separated from his first wife after he reads a scathing entry in her private journal; he meets Sachs because Sachs admires a story of his; and the novel's main sequence of events is set in motion by Maria's discovery of an address book in the street. One of the addresses leads her to her old friend Lillian; another leads Lillian to her future spouse, Dimaggio. The point: books can be magical. As Aaron puts it: "Maria opened the book, and out flew the devil, out flew a scourge of violence, mayhem, and death." Names hold mystical meaning: Peter Aaron's names (the first being that of Christ's chief disciple, the second that of Moses's brother and spokes-

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man) reflect his role as Sachs's admirer, spiritual brother, and chronicler; and the name of Reed Dimaggio, who abandons a conventional academic career to become an anarchist, appropriately suggests two very different American heroes: Joe DiMaggio and John Reed. (Among the book's minor characters, moreover, is one Valerie Maas—a relative, perhaps, of Oedipa Maas in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*?)

Where does truth reside? What is knowable, dependable, predictable? Noting that Sachs and Fanny told different stories, both equally persuasive, about their private life, Aaron concludes that there is "no universal truth," and certainly no divinable truth: "the real is always ahead of what we can imagine. No matter how wild we think our inventions might be, they can never match the unpredictability of what the real world continually spews forth." Aaron comes to view his friends as symbols of this unknowability and unpredictability: Maria (who performs avant-garde "studies in the shifting nature of the self") is "the reigning spirit of chance, as goddess of the unpredictable"; Sachs is "a symptom of my ignorance about all things, an emblem of the unknowable itself." (It is as if they are not real people at all, but only characters in a book.) Aaron suggests, moreover, that novels live to the extent that they reflect the unknowable, unfathomable, and unpredictable character of life: "Books are born out of ignorance, and if they go on living after they are written, it's only to the degree that they cannot be understood." Yet unpredictability does not imply meaninglessness: both Sachs and Aaron learn "that nothing was meaningless, that everything in the world was connected to everything else."

Freedom and imprisonment are discussed endlessly here. We learn that Maria admires Lillian's "absolute inner freedom, the way she lived by her own rules and didn't give a damn what anybody thought." Fanny tells Aaron that "[i]f I didn't give Ben his freedom I'd never be able to hold on to him." Sachs says: "Every man is a prisoner of his pecker." Once imprisoned for draft dodging, he noted that in prison "[y]ou don't have to worry about anything. . . . You're given three meals a day, you don't have to do your laundry, your whole life is mapped out for you in advance. You'd be surprised how much freedom that gives you." Lady Liberty is a recurring image. Sachs recalls a childhood visit to the statue for which, to his mortification, his mother insisted that he dress up: "There we were, about to pay homage to the concept of freedom, and I myself was in chains." When they climbed to the torch and his mother was seized by a fear of falling to her death, "I learned that freedom can be dangerous. If you don't watch out, it can kill you."

But though Auster continues to be thought-provoking on the subject of freedom and imprisonment, he doesn't appear to be all that interested in the connection between these themes and the political ideas that obsess Sachs. Nor are freedom and imprisonment made as palpable here as in his best books. In comparison to *Moon Palace* and *The Music of Chance*—a reader of which shares, first, the protagonists' exhilarating sense of emancipation and possibility, and then their growing astonishment and anxiety at the gradually uncovered patterns of connection in their lives and their increasing sense of confinement—*Leviathan* is an unengaging experience. It lacks those novels' sense of inevitability, their steadily rising tension, their exquisite dramatic trajectory; its second half is characterized by a discernible slackening, a feeling of uncertain direction, that is nowhere in evidence in its two immediate predecessors. Part of the problem, undoubtedly, is that instead of hearing about Sachs's life from Sachs himself or from a third-person narrator who is privy to Sachs's thoughts and actions, we hear about it from Aaron, who has in turn heard about it mostly from others. Nothing much happens to *him*: though he's supposedly absorbed in his memories of and concern for Sachs, his own conflicts or torments, whatever they may be, are hardly present in this book. His enthrallment with Sachs's story comes across clearly; his putative affection for Sachs does not.

Leviathan has other failings. As in Auster's

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other novels, there are passages in which every sentence is a cliché. Sometimes this strikes one as inadvertent; at other times it seems intentional, a way of stressing the familiarity of some elements and of underscoring by contrast the exoticism of other elements. (One might say of this book what Aaron says of *The New Colossus*: that "[e]verything is made to seem plausible, matter-of-fact, even banal in the accuracy of its depiction.") There are, moreover, some logical lapses. Early on, Aaron says he's been visited by two FBI agents who wore sunglasses and had blue eyes. If they wore sunglasses, how could he tell? One of these agents, Harris, also figures in the book's concluding (and probably deliberate) paradox. We learn that Harris, having finally identified Sachs as the Phantom of Liberty and as Dimaggio's killer, has revisited Aaron. "I led Harris across the yard in the hot afternoon sun," Aaron says. "We walked up the stairs together, and once we were inside, I handed him the pages of this book." How could he have done so, since he is just now writing its last sentences? This is a neat little riddle, pointing to the book's status as an invention, a work of artifice, and it forms an interesting pendant to the dedication. For, connoisseur of coincidence though Auster may be, it is no accident that this fictive memoir of a radical novelist by a politically uninvolved fellow writer has been dedicated by its author to a more politically *engagé* colleague. Nor, alas, is it any accident that Auster, by largely aping DeLillo, has fallen off from his customary high level of literary accomplishment.

Like Paul Auster, the Englishman Julian Barnes is an innovative novelist preoccupied with the difficulty of knowledge and the interconnectedness of life in a world of apparent chaos. "History isn't what happens," he tells us in his quirky 1989 novel, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. "History is just what historians tell us." In the world according to Barnes, history is cyclical (and the twentieth century as brutal as any), historical truth virtually impossible to ascertain, and historical data monstrously easy to manipulate; human beings, moreover, are imperfect and imperfectible beasts, each of whom has his own biases, blemishes, and blindnesses, and all of whom, in order to keep on keeping on, need to feel that they are striving toward some specific ideal—whether an eternal life in heaven, or the attainment of pure Communism, or whatever. (Barnes writes in *History* that "you can't get by without the dream.") As a rule, the most winning parts of his clever—if sometimes tediously farcical—fictions are expository or argumentative; their chief failing is the absence of credible stories and characters.

In this regard, Barnes's seventh novel, *The Porcupine*, represents an impressive departure.[2] Set in 1991 in an unnamed Eastern European country that has recently traded in Communism for capitalism (a transition known locally as "the Changes"), this low-key, novella-length book concerns Criminal Law Case Number One, in which the nation's elderly ex-leader, Stoyo Petkanov, is being prosecuted by a youngish law professor named Peter Solinsky. If the two men's initials are the same, only reversed, it is doubtless because Barnes means to suggest that they are mirror images of each other, and that the contrast between their strongly held political views—Solinsky hates Communism and considers Petkanov a heartless murderer; Petkanov believes in his heart that he has served his people well, that they loved him for it, and that Communism will ultimately triumph—is mainly a matter of generational differences. Barnes breathes life into both characters, and he does so not through the expected courtroom clashes (there is a bare minimum of that sort of thing here) but by reading their minds and recording their private conversations outside the court. To be sure, one keeps wondering: do Communist dictators really think as Petkanov does? Do they really believe in Communist ideals? Do they really feel that all their wicked acts are morally justified because they're means to a virtuous end? One

2 *The Porcupine*, by Julian Barnes; Knopf, 138 pages, $17.

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tends to doubt it; all the more impressive, then, that Petkanov nonetheless feels real.

Indeed, much of this book strikes one as wonderfully right: the gray atmosphere, the flat narrative voice, the irony-heavy dialogue, the matter-of-fact recognition of what it can be like to live through history. (One character complains that Petkanov's trial is "BORING." Replies a friend: "History often is when it happens. Then it becomes interesting later.") There is a rightness, too, about Barnes's view of life's moral ambiguities: the court's jurisdiction is dubious at best; the evidence against Petkanov is faked; Solinsky's wife, whose father is a leading Party member, gripes that the whole thing is a "modern version" of "a show trial." The inclusion in Petkanov's testimony of a list of his medals and of lengthy quotations from the vapid tributes paid him by foreign leaders (among them President Carter and Queen Elizabeth) serves to suggest that every head of state who has ever dealt with such despots as Petkanov is an accomplice in their evil. The lesson of it all: there's no perfect justice, no commander in chief with clean hands.

Where Barnes goes overboard here, I think, is in giving at least as much weight to the drawbacks as to the merits of Communism's fall. Near the novel's end, a group of friends sit in "a smoky cafe which had been a bookshop before the Changes." Barnes suggests that, thanks to those Changes, a once-serious culture is in danger of turning superficial: one of the friends asks if he isn't free now "to be frivolous for the rest of my life if I want to be?" Then there's "Aloysha," a huge bronze statue of a soldier that was erected after World War II in tribute to the Russian "liberators." Once a symbol of tyranny, Aloysha is now, in Barnes's rendering, a forlorn relic; when the statue is finally pulled down, Barnes makes the loss seem poignant. This is, let it be said, one of those moments when one realizes that, good as *The Porcupine* is, one could never mistake it for the work of someone who has actually lived under Communism.

Barnes consistently draws parallels between Communism and religion. A crone's portrait of Lenin is referred to as "her icon." Petkanov calls himself "a true believer." Solinsky, quoting his dying father, asks Petkanov: "Which is worse, the true believer who continues to believe despite all the evidence of observable reality, or the person who admits such reality yet continues to claim to be a true believer?" Petkanov replies: "Every man has doubts. It is normal. Perhaps there were times when even I did not believe. But I allowed others to. Can you do as much?" Solinsky counters by describing Petkanov sardonically as a "flawed priest who leads the ignorant to heaven." At times, one feels that Barnes's aim in drawing such analogies isn't to defend Communism but to explain, so that Westerners can understand it, the seemingly perverse tenacity with which certain Communists cling to their ideology. This he accomplishes marvelously. Yet at times he does seem to admire the stubbornness of Petkanov's belief (indeed, he depicts him virtually as a religious martyr) and to see Solinsky, for all his dedication to democratic ideas, as something of an opportunist and self-seeker. At the end of the novel, moreover, we're plainly meant to see that Petkanov's former subjects have begun flooding into the churches not because they now feel free to do so, but because, robbed of Communism, they're hungry for something to believe in.

Granted, one of Barnes's major goals here is to subvert simplistic, sentimental views of Communism's fall by reminding us that human nature doesn't change: where there are human beings, there will be corruption, no matter what system they live under. Yet he himself makes use of sentimentalism—notably in the portrait of Petkanov, in the passages about Aloysha, and in the concluding vignette of an old lady standing silently in the rain clutching a framed picture of Lenin. Barnes is sentimental, in short, about Communists and their affection for Communist icons. A reader of this novel might easily forget that there are few genuine Marxists in former Soviet-bloc countries; to them, the system of Lenin and Stalin was not

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a great truth but a fraud, a foundation for tyranny, a cause of fear. What is missing in this book is sufficient recognition of Eastern Europe as a place where, until very recently, an American traveler could see terror in the eyes of fellow railroad passengers when a man in uniform came around to check tickets, and where crossing from West to East Berlin meant leaving a place whose inhabitants appeared happy and robust for a place where people looked gray, enervated, hopeless. These were not folks who believed in the system under which they lived. One of this novel's implicit questions—which is better, life with purpose and persecution or life without either?—is based on false premises: for Communism, in its latter days, was not a faith; it is democracy that has given Eastern Europe something to believe in. This reviewer happened to read *The Porcupine* on the day of the Presidential election, and it is hard to imagine Communism offering anything to compare to the thrill of taking one's place, in the rain, at the end of a line of voters stretching halfway down a long block from a synagogue door. *The Porcupine* is highly effective, then, but it is also something of a lie.

A less striking but somewhat more honest view of the collapse of tyranny is provided by the Irishman Hugo Hamilton's *The Last Shot*.[3] This spare, vigorous second novel offers two related stories that are set forty-four years apart. One story is that of Bertha Sommer, a naïve young German who, in the last days of World War II, holds down a civilian job at a Nazi garrison in Laun, Czechoslovakia. With the Red Army at the gates, she and Franz Kern, a friendly Wehrmacht soldier, hightail it toward Allied-occupied Germany. En route, she makes love to him (though he's married), resolves to emigrate with him to America, and is abducted and molested by two Poles. Interspersed with the chapters that relate this story are chapters set in 1980, during the fall of Communism in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. The narrator here is a youngish Vermonter who lives in West Germany and who—for reasons that remain unclear till the novel's end—wants to track down the aged Franz Kern. His account, in which the usage (e.g., "different to," "in hospital," and "queue") is often curiously non-Yank, focuses largely on his relationship with his longtime best friend, Jürgen, and with his ex-girlfriend, now Jürgen's wife, whose distress over her Down's syndrome toddler drives her to escape occasionally into the narrator's bed.

If Hamilton gives us two adulterous couples living half a century apart, it's to remind us, as Barnes does in his own way, that the more things change, the more they stay the same: corrupt regimes topple, beleaguered spouses cheat, innocent children suffer. Some live and some die, with no apparent rhyme or reason. Good may overcome evil on the world stage, but evil endures and must be conquered anew; meanwhile obscure people continue to perform small acts of sacrifice or selfishness that change the lives of other obscure people. The novel's conceit, reflected in the title, is that when Kern saves Bertha from her Polish abductors, in an incident that will never be known to the writers of history books, he fires the last shot of the war—Hamilton's point being that wars and social revolutions are events not only in the history of the world but in the history of individuals, whose memories of their own heroism and/or treachery will die with them. Despite an almost inordinate restraint and modesty of scale, this is an admirable story about human attachments and historical exigencies.

Also noteworthy in a modest way is *Antiquity Street*, an elegant, evocative first novel that was written in English by an Egyptian using the pseudonym Sonia Rami.[4] The book offers a Middle Eastern twist on a time-honored plot: upper-class woman ro-

3 *The Last Shot*, by Hugo Hamilton; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 175 pages, $20.

4 *Antiquity Street*, by Sonia Rami; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 242 pages, $20.

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mances lower-class man. Rami's unnamed heroine and narrator is a Harvard student in her twenties, the spoiled daughter of a retired Egyptian diplomat and his deeply traditional wife. This girl has brought her parents terrible shame and embarrassment: she's been thrown out of several schools, she's had a series of scandalous affairs, and she's bailed out of an arranged marriage. Though their wealth, prestige, and monumental forbearance have enabled her to lead this irresponsible life without suffering the usual social consequences, she's repaid them only with disrespect. Home from college for an extended visit, she wastes no time in disgracing her family yet again—this time by romancing Alex, an ambitious, spirited hustler in his thirties whom her gravely ill father has taken on as a lackey and companion. Though this uptown girl and downtown boy meet at her family's palatial apartment in Cairo's Zamalik district—once the exclusive province of the British overlords and local blue-bloods, but now polluted by "the new moneyed class"—it is in Alex's hovel on Antiquity Street that the two lovers conduct their brief, intense affair.

If *The Last Shot*, then, introduces two couples whose attraction is not purely romantic, and whose clandestine, ill-fated affairs are acts of family disloyalty, *Antiquity Street* is about one such couple. Both books highlight the social circumstances and political tumults that give these affairs urgency, resonance, and poignancy, and against the background of which (we are reminded) the problems of two little people don't amount to a hill of beans. For Antiquity Street, in Rami's view, is plainly a paradigm of her country today—filthy, poor, overcrowded. In these parts, being an unhyphenated Egyptian isn't cool on either end of the economic ladder: Alex despises his dark neighbors and prides himself on his white skin and supposed Greek blood (though he turns out to be at least half Egyptian); the brat's parents wax nostalgic for pre-Nassar days when Cairo and Alexandria were vibrant, pseudo-European cities full of light-skinned Turko-Egyptian aristocrats like themselves. The brat, for her part, rejects her folks' snobbery and racism even as she shares their nostalgia. Yet she remains a brat. Indeed, it's never clear whether the author realizes how much of a brat this girl is. Certainly the brat doesn't realize it. One keeps wondering: what draws these two lovers together? Is the brat romancing Alex to irk her folks? Is Alex (whose main sexual interest seems to be in men) using her as a steppingstone to wealth and America? In such cases, can one entirely separate out love, lust, and selfish motives (conscious or unconscious)?

Wisely, Rami never resolves this ambiguity. The book's only surprise, indeed, is that it offers no surprises: the brat doesn't end up pregnant or in prison or disinherited; she doesn't catch Alex in bed with her dad or take him back to Cambridge and lose him to a member of the Harvard crew team. No, her story plays itself out in genteel, predictable fashion, a sort of Third World *Brief Encounter* for the 1990s that retains our interest largely by means of its psychological acuity, its graphic portrait of Cairo life, and its sumptuous prose. Indeed, Rami's prose is often a bit *too* rich. Self-consciously ornamental phrases abound: "the ardent smell of roses," "the magical ease of our nascent friendship." Rami can't refer to "tropical vegetation" without calling it "exuberant," can't mention the climate without labeling it "inexorable." Our heroine doesn't just drink, she sits "slaking my thirst with pomegranate juice." Yet for all the mannered and precious language, Rami can write with passion and conviction. At its best, her vivid delineation of her homeland's extremes—its beauty and ugliness, privilege and poverty—recalls such writers as R. K. Narayan, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, and Mohammed Mrabet; and if *Antiquity Street* doesn't quite approach the level of accomplishment of the *Cairo Trilogy* by Naguib Mahfouz (several of whose novels are, like Rami's book, named for thoroughfares in the Egyptian capital), she could most certainly pass as a promising protégée of her native Nobelist, with whom she shares a winning absorption in the lives of Cairo families and the life of Cairo's streets.

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Books

Little Wilson & big God

by George Sim Johnston

In the Church of England, Oscar Wilde once quipped, a man succeeds "not through his capacity for belief, but through his capacity for disbelief." In the case of the English biographer and novelist A. N. Wilson, however, skepticism did not come easily. After reading English at Oxford, he trained for ordination as an Anglican minister. Though he withdrew from the seminary to become a writer, he remained, by his own account, a devout Christian—one, moreover, who was drawn to biographical subjects with strong religious contours. In his portraits of Milton, Hilaire Belloc, and C. S. Lewis, Wilson showed a respect for supernatural faith that is rare in modern letters. Whereas most modern biographers simply assume that a person does not possess a soul, at least in Saint Augustine's sense of the word, Wilson had no trouble writing of Belloc that "it is not wholly absurd to see in his last years the work of sanctification and grace in progress. That is not to say that he was turning into a saint in the full sense of the word. But there was an unquestionable growth in holiness."

In recent years, however, Wilson has apostatized in the most garrulous manner. In interviews, magazine articles, and books, he has sought to expose Christianity as a first-century confidence game that somehow got out of hand. Not only Christianity, but any religion professing moral absolutes, Wilson now believes, is bad for the human race. He begins his recent pamphlet "Against Religion" with the arresting thought that "love of God is the root of all evil."[1] He ends by lumping Pope John Paul II, the Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Reverend Ian Paisley together as a collection of "gooses." Wilson thus outdoes any eighteenth-century Encyclopedist in his contempt for priests, ministers, and mullahs. "Boo, boo, boo to them all," the pamphlet's closing monosyllabic volley, is indicative of the tone Wilson now deems appropriate to the subject.

Now, it is often the case that the reasons adduced by those antagonistic to religion for their opposition are not the real ones. Scratch a scholarly polemic against the Real Presence or the historicity of Moses and you may discover someone who is irritated at not finding loopholes in the Sixth and Ninth Commandments. It is a rule of modern discourse, however, that the tools of psychology, such as they are, may be applied only to the deconstruction of religious faith and never to the motives of its opponents. So we will take at face value Wilson's assertion that it was a dispassionate study of the New Testament in light of recent scholarship that caused him to lose his faith, although it hardly seems to explain the fast-dripping malice with which he now approaches the subject.

However tortuous and scholarly Wilson's

1 "Against Religion," by A. N. Wilson. Chatto CounterBlasts No. 19. Chatto & Windus (London), 51 pages, £3.99 paper.

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flight from Christianity, he seems to have ended in a position not unlike that of a talk-show host like Phil Donahue. The crux of it is a rejection of all absolutes as rigid and authoritarian, and a contempt for any religion that seeks to impose moral or theological norms on its adherents. Thus, according to Wilson, Pope John Paul II is guilty of "intolerance" when he tells the theologian Hans Küng—who publicly denied several central Catholic dogmas—that he can no longer call himself a Catholic teacher. (Theologians who are "silenced" by the Vatican usually get lucrative book and lecture deals, so Wilson shouldn't feel badly for Küng.) The problem with this line of argument, as even Wilson must recognize, is that if it were applied universally, no organization, let alone religion, could function. So it is used selectively, according to one's political aesthetic. If Nelson Mandela bounced a member of the ANC for arguing that apartheid is not a bad thing, it is doubtful that we would hear shouts of "intolerance" from the gallery where Wilson now sits.

Wilson is rightly upset about the treatment of his Oxford contemporary Salman Rushdie by the ayatollahs. But his pamphlet takes this and other extreme cases, such as the Spanish Inquisition, and presents them as the sum of religion's contribution to history. How, one is tempted to ask, did it come about that, out of the darkness and anarchy that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire, there came to be Chartres Cathedral, universities and hospitals, the writ of habeus corpus, and the *Divine Comedy*? Did all this come from Attila the Hun? Wilson's is the usual parochial modern attitude, still best exemplified by Wells's *Outline of History*, in which the Renaissance suddenly appears by spontaneous generation after eight hundred years of theological darkness. It is an attitude that Belloc himself had in mind when he defined a barbarian as one who uses and enjoys the artifacts of civilization without understanding their origin.

In his new biography of Jesus, Wilson does not attempt to hide his freshly-minted hostility to Christianity.[2] Barely a few pages into the preface, he is attacking the institution of the Eucharist as a historical fraud. At the same time, he insists that he is offering a "dispassionate" study of Jesus. His objective, then, is to drive a wedge between Jesus and the faith that proclaims his name: "Few Christian Churches have ever viewed the teaching of Jesus with anything but contempt." In fact, for Wilson, the most reliable test for the authenticity of any saying of Jesus's is its apparent contradiction with later Christian practice. Here he is simply following, without attribution, the radical scholar R. H. Fuller, who claims that Jesus's sayings "which conflict with the post-Easter faith are *prima facie* authentic."

The Jesus who emerges in Wilson's book is a somewhat mystifying *hasid*—preacher, exorcist, holy man—whose moral teachings were often dubious and contradictory. This Jesus had no intention of founding Christianity, which Wilson thinks he would have abhorred; he was (Wilson takes a cue here from such scholars as Geza Vermes) a recognizable first-century Jew who could not possibly have believed that he was the second person of the Trinity or that he instituted the Eucharist at Passover. As for the business of miracles and the Resurrection, Wilson flatly states that such things are impossible, although he allows that Jesus may have had a certain virtuosity as a faith healer. (Wilson doesn't mention it, but even the Talmud alludes to Jesus's healings.)

Since the New Testament presents quite a different portrait of Jesus, Wilson has his work cut out for him in excising passages which don't fit his *a priori* scheme. Here he joins company with the more radical biblical scholarship of the past 150 years. In the nineteenth century, scholars like F. C. Baur, David Strauss, and Ernest Renan intruded on the mind of Europe with the news that the gospels were mostly fabrications in which a good deal of pious mythology was woven around a few stray authentic bits about Jesus. This school of exegesis owed

2 *Jesus,* by A. N. Wilson; Norton, 269 pages, $22.95.

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much to the pervasive influence of Hegel, which suggested the possibility that Christianity was to be explained not as deriving from a single powerful personality but rather from certain ideas which were necessarily in the air in the first century. Wilson gives a thumbnail sketch of the methodology of these scholars and is coy about whether he really buys it; but he then proceeds, like them, cheerfully to discard anything in the gospels that doesn't fit his anti-theological agenda.

The question of the veracity of the New Testament is one that is approached on an *a priori* basis by believers and skeptics alike. "But for the Church, I should not believe the Gospels," wrote Saint Augustine. A neutral party, if there were such, might reasonably approach the New Testament with the assumption that either the four evangelists were telling the truth as they and other witnesses saw it, or that they concocted a collection of whopping lies which ought to be put on the same shelf as Mother Goose. There is now much less doubt than there used to be that the gospels were written by men who either knew Jesus or, in the case of Mark and Luke, talked to people who did. No work of Greek or Roman antiquity has such an early and profuse textual history as the gospels, early autographs of which date from well before A.D. 200. The works of Plato and Virgil are known solely from medieval manuscripts transcribed (Wilson take note) by monks, often from a single copy. Yet nobody doubts that Plato and Virgil wrote these books. In the case of the gospels, we have abundant evidence that they were written by the four evangelists, with a few interpolations. Not only is there the evidence of the texts themselves, but there is also evidence from external sources: the writings of Clement of Rome, for example, and of Ignatius of Antioch, which indicate that the first three gospels were known in their current form throughout the Christian world prior to the death of Saint John around the year 95, and Ignatius's own shortly after it.

Since he is writing a biography of Jesus, Wilson has to make some use of the evangelists, so he cannot lump them entirely with Mother Goose. His approach, then, is to put them—or the witnesses they relied on—in the same category as Elvis fans who swear they've seen their idol posthumously hovering above a McDonald's. In this way, Wilson can discard the supernatural bits while still using the gospels as historical sources. But even then, if a non-supernatural episode is not to his taste, such as the stoning of Stephen in the Book of Acts, Wilson simply accuses the author of "untruths and distortions." If this approach were applied to any other historical documents, history could not be written.

With these cards partly on the table, Wilson proceeds to put together a life of Jesus whose only discernible purpose is to annoy believing Christians. (To put my own cards on the table, I am among them.) He starts with the Nativity, which he says could not have occurred in Bethlehem. Why? He gives three reasons. First, the prophet Micah said that the Messiah would be born there, and any occurrence which seems to fulfill an Old Testament prophecy is *prima facie* a pious lie. Then, according to Wilson, John 7:42 "very specifically" states that Jesus was not born there. But in fact, all that the passage in question—"Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not scripture said that the Christ . . . comes from Bethlehem . . . ?"—indicates is that those who heard Jesus preach on one occasion naturally assumed that a man who had spent his early life in Galilee was born there as well. Finally, Wilson points out that no ancient historian "ever made the slightest reference" to the census ordered by Augustus that, according to Luke, brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. But we have fragmentary remains of a number of Roman censuses unmentioned by ancient historians, and both Justin Martyr and Tertullian, writing within living memory of the apostolic age, state that the record of the census mentioned in Luke was preserved down to their time in the archives of Rome. Origen, moreover, writes a century later that "in Bethlehem, the cave is pointed out where He

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was born. . . ." Such cave stables are not rare in Palestine. Wilson does not mention these historical sources, probably because they are Christian—although Tertullian and Origen ought to appeal to him because they became heretics.

On virtually every page, in a tone that brooks no contradiction, Wilson makes similar assertions, which are, at best, based on questionable inferences. He gets a lot of mileage, for example, out of the verse in Mark that refers to four "brothers" of Jesus—James, Joset, Simon, and Jude. He does not mention that in Hebrew and Aramaic "brother" can indicate several degrees of kinship; neither language has a word for cousin or nephew. In Genesis, Lot is called the "brother" of Abraham, whereas we've already been told that he was Abraham's nephew. Nowhere are these four "brothers" referred to as "sons of Mary"—i.e., Jesus's mother—and there is evidence from other gospel passages that James and Joset were the sons of Mary of Clophas, a "sister" of Mary, and hence Jesus's cousins. But Wilson wants Jesus to have four blood brothers, so all contradictory evidence is kept from the reader, most of whom, Wilson seems to suppose (and probably rightly), don't read the Bible.

Wilson can't help liking Jesus, although he thinks him a bit crazed. He reserves most of his animus for Saint Paul, whom he regards as the real "inventor" of Christianity. Early in the book, Wilson cuts him down to size with the help of some Freudian reductionism. Paul's view of the cosmos, Wilson suggests, was simply a projection of his own internal contradictions. Wilson has a hard time accounting for Paul's "obsession" with Jesus, so he speculates on the basis of no evidence whatsoever that Paul was the high priest's servant who had his ear cut off by Peter's sword in the garden of Gethsemane. "If I had a chance to return in time and meet Paul, I should take a close look at his ears."

The reader comes to wish that Wilson did have a time machine, because he pays so little attention to what historians write. Concerning Paul, for example, Wilson tells us that the story of the Sanhedrin sending him to Damascus to round up Christians "cannot possibly be true" since the Sanhedrin lacked jurisdiction outside of Judea. This was the case *de jure*; but as historians like Henri Daniel-Rops point out, Jews throughout the diaspora acknowledged the *de facto* authority of the Sanhedrin, which, moreover, as the Talmud demonstrates, had a harsh way of dealing with religious crimes.

Jesus is a book with an agenda. It takes no account of sources that contradict its conclusions. Like many biblical scholars who preceded him, Wilson's whole approach is circular and therefore not "scientific." You cannot draw on a set of theological assumptions to determine what are and are not facts, and then turn around to use those facts to clinch your theological argument. The book, moreover, is sloppily composed, and the reader has to wade through many unwarranted repetitions, the result, no doubt, of Wilson's particular obsessions. Many of these have to do with the Church—for example, Wilson's notion that nowhere does historical Christianity show more contempt for the teachings of Christ than in its refusal to admit sinners into its fold. What can Wilson mean by this? Saint Augustine was certainly a sinner, and he ended up a bishop. The Church's position has always been that people are fallible and that even saints are going to sin: hate the sin but love the sinner. The early popes fought tooth and nail against such heresies as Donatism, which held that those who commit certain grave sins are forever beyond the pale. All Christian denominations demand some effort of amendment—as did Christ himself when he told the woman caught in adultery to stop it. The Church does have a problem with a person who remains obstinate in a grave sin. But does this contradict the attitude of Jesus, whose first reported words to the public were a call to repentance?

Talk of sin and repentance must sound like Victorian mood music to Wilson, who now inhabits a moral universe where everything is unfixed except certain fashionable atti-

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tudes. That he finds most everyone connected with Christianity so imperfect is too bad. Most Christians would agree that they fall short of the mark and that terrible things have been done in the name of Christ. But, echoing Evelyn Waugh—who was once asked how he, a Catholic, could be such a beast—might we not consider how much worse things might have been if nothing had occurred in Palestine two thousand years ago?

Shakespeare as shaman

Ted Hughes Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 524 pages, $35

reviewed by C. H. Sisson

Ted Hughes tells us in his foreword to this book that his "interest in the mythologies and folklores of the world" not only "long preceded" his interest in poetry, but "in a way" led him to poetry. The sequence must be unusual, not only in poets but in anyone for whom poetry has any real importance. To be alerted by words and rhythms in hopeless conjunction, before there is anything of the analytical apprehension which passes for understanding, must be the normal condition of a child still in the world of lullabies and nursery rhymes. An "interest in the mythologies and folklores of the world" suggests an epoch considerably beyond not only that, but beyond the time when he first feels the fascination of particular folktales which may have been read to him. It suggests a young scientist at work, not among the test-tubes making a stink but with his nose inside more or less grown-up books, enquiring what thrills can be got from a chilling of the spine or a quickening of the pulse. Whether or not this portrait bears any resemblance to Hughes as a boy, here he is at the age of sixty-two, having achieved several kinds of success as a poet, including public honors, and he is offering us five hundred pages explaining Shakespeare's plays in terms which bear the clearest marks of his early studies. The very title, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, shows them. This is no mere literary-critical work: it plunges into mythological worlds where no mere critic could survive, and in which even Ben Jonson—who spoke of his contemporary's "well-turned and true-filed lines"

> In each of which he seems to shake a lance
> As brandish't in the eyes of ignorance—

might well have been out of his depth.

In fact, Shakespeare's lines are not themselves the primary object of Hughes's enquiry. Nor, indeed, are such usual objects as historical background, imagery, or characters, although all these put in an appearance and have their part to play. Hughes sees Shakespeare's task as that of a playwright who "has to concentrate on his plot and his characters, and on exploring their combined life to the greatest dramatic effect and for the most interesting and valid meaning." This last phrase raises questions which would take us beyond the main theme of the book. Hughes thinks of his own role as seeing "through the surface glitter of the plot into the depth of the mythic plane." To this task he brings not only a close and wide knowledge of Shakespeare's text and a wealth of matter from anthropological sources and the like, but qualifications he owes to his experience of working at both the National Theatre in London and the international Center for Theater Research in Paris—in the latter location as "an ideas man, providing germs of plots" and "dramatic situations," and, in both, in association with the director Peter Brook. The final fillip to the book was given by a correspondence with Donya Feuer, of the Royal Theater in Stockholm, who had earlier followed up a hint from Ted Hughes by putting together a full-length performance made of interlinked extracts from Shakespeare "in which a solo actress revived her Shakespearean earlier incarnations," following the evolution from play to play of a figure which, on Hughes's reading

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of things, lies behind all these characters and would be visible to anyone clear-sighted enough to see through differences of name, appearance, circumstance, and words to the mythic plane below.

It is this notion of the primacy of myth which dominates the present book, and it is perhaps unfortunate that the notion may seem to carry the implication that we get nearest to the truth of Shakespeare's work by a reductive process which involves smashing the surface of it with a sledgehammer. This implication would have been less strongly marked if Hughes had conducted his analysis in such a way as to give the primacy to his theatrical interest. He is acutely aware of the importance, to the dramatist, of a "prototype plot model," and Shakespeare's problems with "the simple practical job of gripping the ordinary public," and he sees the problems in a manner unlikely to be appreciated by readers who know nothing of "modern instruction manuals for professional writers, or of the actual working habits of professional writers harnessed to a demanding production line (whether in Athens's great, competitive century or in the modern TV drama and pulp fiction markets)." One could question whether Hughes makes allowance enough for the historical differences between these markets, but it would certainly have been interesting to have seen the mythical chase this book records conducted more exclusively in practical theatrical terms, from the point of view of an ideas man in the peculiar world of contemporary producers, actors, and technical resources. This would, admittedly, have the drawback of reducing the myth to the status of a gimmick. The alternative Hughes has adopted, on the other hand, has the disadvantage of appearing to take a can-opener to Shakespeare's mind, an operation never hitherto successfully performed.

The basic thesis of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* is that Shakespeare had a "myth" of his own. Hughes starts his account of its evolution with the *Sonnets*, to make good his claim to understand "Shakespeare's own subjectivity," and so to render "the idea of the tragic myth as a living organism—as something that lived inside Shakespeare—more vivid and easier to grasp." The claim is a bold one, of a kind difficult to maintain and impossible to prove, even in the case of twentieth-century writers who have left an untidy litter of evidence behind them, and it is hardly to be relied upon in the case of a sixteenth-century poet who left so few clues about himself. For Hughes, however, the *Sonnets* "make a simplified but strongly marked map of Shakespeare's 'erotic subjectivity.'" We move on to *Venus and Adonis*, the argument being that "the pronounced characteristics of Shakespeare's way of loving . . . which he analyses in the *Sonnets*, are converted in the long poem" into the two mythical characters and what they get up to. Everything in the book follows from this. In *Lucrece* Shakespeare "inverted all the main features of *Venus and Adonis* in a crisply symmetrical counterpoint. . . . The uncontrollably passionate lover, formerly female, is now male. The sexual victim, formerly male, is now female." This is only the beginning of the series of transformations—or more or less approximate identifications—which Hughes detects. After *Venus and Adonis* six or seven years passed during which Shakespeare wrote a dozen plays which failed to develop the themes which were to interest Hughes. Then something changed, and after "conscious preparation" in *As You Like It*, "myth, plot and drama" become one indivisible thing in *All's Well that Ends Well*. Then we come to *Measure for Measure*, and to a crucial point in the development of that Tragic Equation which is Shakespeare's own "myth." "The Angelo who behaved like Adonis has somehow . . . been abruptly supplanted by the Angelo who behaves like Tarquin." Hughes explains the matter as follows:

> It can be seen here . . . that in divining just how the second myth erupts from the first, in other words just how the man who rejects the female, in moral, sexual revulsion, becomes in a moment the man who assaults and tries to

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> destroy her, Shakespeare has divined a natural law. One that presents no mystery to post-Freudians. It is so natural, in fact, that the inevitability of the tragic dramas which follow is based precisely on that law.

This is really the heart of the book. The sequel to *Measure for Measure* is *Troilus and Cressida*, here billed—with supporting arguments—as the first Tragedy of Divine Love.

What follows is an account of the evolution of the Tragic Equation through the seven tragedies. The process is of considerable complexity. The Equation "matures and mutates" in *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, "makes its soul" in *Timon of Athens*, *Coriolanus*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, is transformed in the last plays and finally, in *The Tempest*, is dismantled. One cannot but admire the energy and persistence with which Hughes follows his chosen trail. It could hardly be otherwise than baffling at some points, and with such a long series of changes there are bound to be readers who will regard some of them with a certain skepticism. Thus: "The Queen of Hell is a variable. Her most notable variant . . . is the Boar," "she is the general potential for sexual license," "the orgiastic sexuality of the brothel city of Vienna," "the [Trojan] war over a whore," "the city of treacherous friends," "the Rome of treacherous plebeians." So the series proceeds. It is not to be doubted that Hughes is telling us something significant about the pattern of the plays, but such algebraic inventions must be treated with caution, for they encourage readers to look below the actual text for abstract meanings which are, inevitably, something poorer than Shakespeare gives us in his own words. There is no question of applying to Hughes Coleridge's censure of the critic who "puts on the seven-league boots of self-opinion, and strides at once from an illustrator into a supreme judge, and, blind and deaf, fills his three-ounce phial at the waters of Niagara; and determines positively the greatness of the cataract to be neither more nor less than his three-ounce phial has been able to receive." The author of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* makes it clear that he is not providing a "general commentary" but concentrating "as exclusively as possible" on his particular discovery. The nature of this discovery is such that it involves putting his money on one view of "Shakespeare's vision," and he very properly insists that his account "can be no more than one attempt to describe one view of it." In the end, the Tragic Equation is no more than "a manner of speaking." It is worth setting beside it, for contrast, some words of Dr. Johnson, for whom Shakespeare's words "support no opinion with arguments"—a view Ted Hughes would probably not dissent from. "His persons," Johnson goes on, "act and speak by the influence of those general passions by which all minds are agitated"—a point entirely consonant with a "mythic" view of them. Where Johnson and Hughes might fall out is over the nature of any appropriate "mythic" view. The formula compounded from the stories of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* involves a narrowing of the vision to certain themes. "But love," says Johnson, "is only one of many passions; as it has no great influence on the sum of life, it has little operation in the drama of the poet, who caught his ideas from the living world, and exhibited only what he saw before him. He knew that any other passion, as it was regular or exorbitant, was a cause of happiness or calamity." And Johnson maintained that, whether in comedy, tragedy, or history, "seriousness and merriment were always intermixed." Little enough of this intermixture is seen in Hughes's grim version of Shakespeare's vision.

Behind the whole of his exposition in this book is the notion, which Hughes has developed in other contexts, of the poet as shaman. "Almost all primitive groups are desperately in need of help from 'the other side' all the time." Within more involved historical cultures, that happens only at certain moments of breakdown or crisis. The Reformation was such a moment and Shakespeare—no one would doubt it—was open to all the winds that were blowing about him. It may still surprise some readers that

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he "picked the source-myth of Catholicism for his first long poem," then "picked the source-myth of Puritanism for his second." The identification is surely more apt to assist the development of Hughes's exposition than to cast light on the religious troubles of the times or their effect on the poet. Hughes claims that Eliot and Yeats were shamans like Shakespeare, if of a lesser kind, and maybe he has it in mind to reserve a place for himself in this ancient profession. Whatever the case for regarding poets as shamans, a better model for the discussion of literature would probably be Sainte-Beuve.

The magic begins

Larry J. Schaaf
Out of the Shadows: Herschel, Talbot & the Invention of Photography.
Yale University Press, 188 pages, $50

reviewed by John Szarkowski

As though we were not already sufficiently depressed by the suspicion that we are becoming narrow-minded clods, plowing the tiny fields of our specialities in ever-tightening vortices, Mr. Larry Schaaf has now compounded our problem by giving us a book about two nineteenth-century philosopher-scientists who thought it perfectly natural to assume that they should understand everything.

The nominal center line of Mr. Schaaf's good book is the occasional and tentative collaboration of William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) and John Herschel (1792-1871) in the invention of one of the several early systems of photography. Its true center line is perhaps the character of the scientific enterprise in a place as odd and creative as Britain when Queen Victoria was twenty.

Those who have managed never to confront even the barest outline of the history of photography will have to be told that Talbot was perhaps the most important of the handful of men who invented more-or-less satisfactory versions of photography in the years around 1839, when the version devised by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre was announced to the world. In retrospect we regard Talbot's method as the foundation of modern photography, since it produced a negative (a picture in which the tonal values were reversed), which could in turn be used as a matrix, or a filter, from which any number of positive prints could be produced. The daguerreotype on the other hand was a unique object, like a Polaroid snapshot, and like the Polaroid it was best used for pictures that were of interest to very few people. It took some time however even for Talbot to decide that his indirect system had advantages over Daguerre's direct system. To make matters worse (from Talbot's viewpoint) everyone was more impressed by Daguerre's pictures than by Talbot's. The Frenchman's shiny silvered plates seemed to describe every jot and tittle of the physical world, while Talbot's prints were relatively fuzzy, and almost resembled traditional prints. Early photography was judged as magic, and in those terms Daguerre was clearly and deservedly the winner.

When Daguerre's success was announced to the French Academy of Sciences, Talbot —surprised and alarmed—promptly wrote that institution, and also the Royal Society of London, to say that he too had invented what later came to be called photography, and had done so first. He had in fact succeeded, to a point, in recording camera images by the summer of 1835, and had then dropped this work to concentrate on a work entitled *Hermes: or Classical and Antiquarian Research*, which attempted to integrate his philological and archeological studies. He seemed to have felt that photography would wait until he was ready again to turn his attention to it, a perception that will seem to some readers to reflect a not altogether uncharacteristic arrogance.

When it became clear to Talbot that it was time to stake his claim, he wrote to his friend Herschel for the first time about his photographic researches—or, rather, to inform Herschel that he had discovered "a new Art of Design . . . about five years ago," and that

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he would the next week present a paper on the subject at the meeting of the Royal Society. The purpose of Talbot's letter was neither to offer nor solicit scientific data or insights, but rather, it would seem, to enlist Herschel's support in the delicate matter of securing recognition of his primacy. Herschel replied that he could not get to London (from Slough) because of many engagements and a bad bout of sciatica. His letter also makes it clear that he too was aware of the recent announcement in Paris, but he seems not to have responded to Talbot's alternative suggestion that he, Talbot, would be happy to come to Slough. Within the next three days, his sciatica presumably a little better, Herschel had, in outline, also invented photography.

Sir John Herschel (not to be confused with his father, Sir William, the astronomer who discovered Uranus) was an astronomer, a chemist, a mathematician, a decent poet, and an accomplished flautist. In his later years he translated the *Iliad* into English verse. In spite of all of this his contemporaries loved him, and when he died he was buried in Westminster Abbey beside Isaac Newton.

As a polymath Talbot is only marginally less impressive. As a Cambridge undergraduate he was honored for his translation of *Macbeth* into Greek verse. At thirty-two he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, and thus one of the inner circle of England's intellectual elite. When he was thirty-eight the Society awarded Talbot its Royal Medal, not for the invention of photography, which he had not yet announced, but for his researches in integral calculus. At least one of his obituaries considered his most important work to have been the deciphering of the cuneiform inscriptions of Ninevah. Yet Talbot, unlike Herschel, could not be called well-loved.

Not, at least, until now. Mr. Schaaf has clearly taken Talbot to his heart, and has done as much as one scholar might be expected to do, or more, to redress any debt of regard that is Talbot's due. Mr. Schaaf has immersed himself in, one might say saturated himself with, Talbot; surely he would not take offense at being called a partisan of his hero. This seems to me altogether proper; certainly no man is so mean as to deserve a disinterested biographer. Nevertheless, there are occasions when Mr. Schaaf works a little harder than he might to guide the reader around those mine fields of evidence that could suggest that Talbot was not always so selfless a servant of science, or so sensitive and decent a man, as Mr. Schaaf would have it. The general reader might, for example, be interested to know that the Vicar of Stone, Buckinghamshire, the Reverend Joseph Bancroft Reade, claimed to have discovered a central element of Talbot's most successful chemistry, and to have explained his technique to Talbot at a meeting which Talbot did not recall. In Mr. Schaaf's book Reade's name appears only in an endnote, in which the reader is referred to another book for a consideration of his claims.

I should think that much of Mr. Schaaf's book will be of interest to students concerned with the character of England's intellectual life at the beginning of Victoria's reign. Such cultural historians, as well as photography specialists, will be happy to have a somewhat fuller sampling of the Talbot-Herschel correspondence than has been readily available. But an even fuller view of these basic sources would have been welcome, and in so luxurious a volume it should have been possible to reproduce in full, in an appendix, some of the more significant exchanges. On more than one occasion I found myself wishing for more of what Talbot or Herschel had actually written, before getting to Mr. Schaaf's explanation of what they really meant.

Mr. Schaaf makes the point that Talbot's view of photography changed, during the years of his most intimate involvement with his invention, from a fundamentally technical and instrumental concern to one that came to engage with sensibility the new medium's peculiar picture-making potentials. I agree with this critical insight, and am surprised that the book's expensively re-

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produced plates do not do more to document it. In my view too many of them show us instead the faded ruins of technical experiments. Admittedly, these do have a ghostly and evocative beauty, and to the historian of photography they also have a kind of quasi-religious significance, like the bones of ancient saints in crumbling reliquaries. But just as those bones tell us little of value about the lives of the saints, so many of the trials so handsomely reproduced here tell us little about the development of photography as a distinctive picture-making method, or about Henry Talbot's participation in that story. One splendid exception should be noted: Mr. Schaaf shows us an earlier version of what is perhaps Talbot's most famous picture: *The Open Door*, of 1844. The earlier version is by no means a negligible picture, but the latter one is indisputably better: simpler and stronger and more deeply engaging. The comparison provides a clear and persuasive demonstration of Talbot's growth as a picture maker.

Mr. Schaaf's single-minded devotion to Talbot is generally transparent enough to cause no serious harm. On occasion however it does lead him to adopt positions that will be misleading to the general reader. Perhaps the most egregious example of Mr. Schaaf's tendency to tailor the world to fit his subject's stature comes at the very end of the book, when Mr. Schaaf considers the failure of Talbot's great book *The Pencil of Nature*.[1] In 1844 Talbot, believing that he had solved his invention's basic technical problems, announced the publication of a work to be produced in ten or twelve monthly fascicles, each containing five original photographs, with essays that discussed photography's applications and potentials. Each part cost twelve shillings; if ten installments had been produced the work would have cost six pounds—perhaps half the annual wage of a household maid. In the event only six installments were published, over a period of not six months but almost two years. Talbot had underestimated the production difficulties, but that problem would not have been crucial; the true disaster was that many of the prints were fading rapidly, their rich mulberry blacks changing to *café au lait*, and the subtle higher values changing to plain paper. One of Talbot's assistants later wrote his employer and reported that "artists who have [Talbot's prints] are interested in giving every publicity to their growing faintness."

To Talbot, for whom *The Pencil of Nature* should have produced riches and honor and the recognition, among his peers, that his invention was more beautiful and more valuable than Daguerre's invention, the fading was surely a genuine tragedy; one would expect a dedicated friend to seize on this opportunity and—perhaps even citing Job, Macbeth, Willy Loman, etc.—squeeze from it all the rich human juices that the story in fact contains. Mr. Schaaf, on the contrary, tells us in effect that the problem was simply a matter of immutable chemical rules—that Talbot's prints faded because photographs formed of silver will inevitably fade: "Talbot had come to accept that photographs based on silver, no matter how carefully they were done, were cursed with original sin. And thus it remains. . . . no amount of refinement in processing can totally protect the silver from the ravages of time and storage." It is difficult to know what he might mean by this; presumably it is something more cogent than noting than the Acropolis and the Pyramids have declined sadly, and that our solar system itself is ephemeral. Surely Mr. Schaaf is aware—to cite one conspicuous example—that large numbers of silver prints made in France by the firm of Blanquart-Evrard less than a decade after *The Pencil of Nature* remain today in excellent condition.

In his acknowledgments Mr. Schaaf expresses his debt to ninety-eight (!) institutions and 113 individuals. One might guess that seldom in the annals of scholarship have

1 Mr. Schaaf is also the author of the very valuable introductory volume of the facsimile reprint of *The Pencil of Nature*, published in 1989 by Hans P. Kraus, Jr., Inc. in celebration of the sesquicentennial of photography's invention.

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so many done so much for one youthful historian. Listed alphabetically among the 113 individuals is the name of Beaumont Newhall, but no mention is made of his 1967 book *Latent Image*, a trim and elegant masterpiece which, like Mr. Schaaf's book, is about the invention of photography. Newhall's book, although smaller and thinner, is broader in its perspectives, and free of the anglophilic bias that turns the French inventors Daguerre, Niépce, and Bayard into mere competitors. For its concision and its catholicity, it remains the essential introduction to the subject of photography's invention.

Mr. Schaaf's researches on Talbot have clearly been prodigious, and it seems safe to assume that they will result in additional publications on the work and the person of this important and elusive genius, carrying the story forward from the present volume's somewhat arbitrary cut-off date of 1844. Like the present work, they will surely deserve and reward our attention.

yes is a pleasant country

George J. Firmage, editor
E. E. Cummings:
Complete Poems, 1904-1962.
Liveright/Norton, 1,102 pages, $50

reviewed by Colin Falck

In a period of cripplingly self-conscious *ironic* literature, the naïveté of the poet E. E. Cummings has a refreshing air of spontaneity and of old-fashioned psychological normality about it. No poet, at any rate no modern poet, can be genuinely naïve, and what Cummings gives us is not so much poetic naïveté itself as the poetic presentation, sometimes very delicately crafted, of human experience in some of its simpler and more naïve modes. That this experience is usually an experience of pre- or not-fully-adult spiritual innocence is not only Cummings's strength but also his weakness. When he confines himself to the chosen simplicities of his me-and-you-against-the-world lyricism Cummings can be winning and attractive; when he turns from these affirmations to an outside world that he can comprehend only dismissively, satirically, or not at all, he moves less attractively toward a know-nothing rejection of the greater part of adult life as we now live it.

The anthologists, including the poet himself, have done their work on Cummings over a good many decades, and they have done it thoroughly. "There is little new one can say of Cummings," wrote Weldon Kees half a century ago, and there is little new that anyone has said since. Scholars and librarians will welcome George J. Firmage's beautifully produced and updated *Complete Poems* (there are thirty-six formerly uncollected poems, and the typography has been painstakingly corrected against the original manuscripts) but ordinary readers—and Cummings is one of the few modern poets ever to have acquired any—will find that the best poems have long ago been winnowed from the rest. What mainly comes across, as one surveys the *oeuvre* laid out across its eleven hundred pages, is how adequately the Cummings vision has been conveyed by the earlier and less marmoreal samplings. Most strikingly, one sees how little Cummings really developed throughout his fifty-odd-year career. Here is a poet who knew what he was doing, who made an impact with some of his earlier attempts at doing it, and who went on doing it for several decades longer without any serious inclination toward self-doubt or self-examination. Here is a poet on the Edenic side of the methodological self-scrutiny which has overtaken so much of English-language literature in the twentieth century—and here is a poet on whom one might gladly have wished the affliction of self-consciousness, or even of morbid self-probing, for the sake of his later and greater poetic health. In one of his poems Cummings tells us that "yes is a pleasant country," and it is a country that he does his best not to have to leave throughout his poetic career.

For early-twentieth-century American poetry, the ideological storm-center was always

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the conflict between transcendental intensity and worldly cynicism, the necessity of choosing between passion and irony, the issue of whether and how far the "infinitely gentle/ infinitely suffering thing" which is the human spirit might survive amidst the degraded materialistic values of the modern world. The antithesis that eventually led T. S. Eliot toward religion, Ezra Pound toward bigotry and insanity, Hart Crane toward self-destruction, and Robert Frost toward cracker-barrel Republicanism drove Cummings into the Wendy-house. "Unthinking" (as Malcolm Cowley put it) his Harvard education, Cummings declared his independence, both in his life and in his work, from the "real" world of time and material valuations. His awareness of the antithesis is shown neatly enough in a three-part early sequence of quasi-sonnets which he divides into "Realities" (i.e., nasty, ugly modern things), "Unrealities" (i.e., dreams and coy longings), and "Actualities." The poems of this last group are the least impressive, and conspicuously fail to transcend the opposition that the poet knows they should be transcending. For the rest of his career, Cummings settled for the playing-off of nature and innocence against advertising, business, politics—and most kinds of rational thinking. In doing this he was resolute and unapologetic. His rendering of a tough-talking America ("Jimmie's got a goil/ goil/ goil,/ . . . / talk about your Sal-/ Sal-/ Sal-/ talk/ about your Salo/-mes but gimmie Jimmie's gal" etc.) was one of his ways of showing us that he knows the real world too and that poets are not the ineffectual wimps they have usually been taken for. This tribute of sensibility to worldly energy was a part of the literary style of the age, but Cummings went less far with it than did, say, Crane or Hemingway or Faulkner—and by drawing his line of integrity closer to childhood itself he managed to stand by his prelapsarian pledge.

Cummings's pivotal subject is sex, or love, in its simplest and most childlike modes, and the earlier poems that deal with these things are among his best. His view of childhood as an index of health goes back behind the darker tones of Blake or Wordsworth to the innocent savagery of Rousseau, and his view of sex is entirely un-Freudian. From the childish-magical "in Just-/ spring when the world is mud-/ luscious the little/ lame balloonman/ whistles far and wee" to "Thy fingers make early flowers of/ all things," or from "i like my body when it is with your/ body" to "you shall above all things be glad and young"—all four among the most anthologized of the poems—is no very great distance in terms of psychological or philosophical complexity. In poems like these, Cummings's perceptions seem more assured and authentic (and in their close skirting of sentimentality, more courageous) than many perceptions we have been forced to believe in in an age that has become almost destitute of love poetry. In this area his instincts are sure, and his limitations are only the limitations of the area itself. The cute but beautiful

> somewhere i have never travelled,gladly
> beyond
> any experience,your eyes have their silence:
> in your most frail gesture are things which
> enclose me,
> or which i cannot touch because they are too
> near
> . . . .
> nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands

(though it was not one of Cummings's own favorites) captures the essence of the Cummings love poem: its cuteness is a part of the very intimacy it expresses (we only have to compare it with the stiffly *conventional* conventionality of traditional love lyrics), a form of love behavior itself rather than a merely literary manner of address. Here, the poet's hallmark eccentricities of syntax and typography (in this poem quite restrained) are superbly at the service of the conveyed experience. Altogether elsewhere, meanwhile, in the corrupt and fallen-into-time world of adult America, the advertisers, the businessmen, the politicians, and the professors are laying their curses on our fairest joys—and Cummings intermittently sallies forth to do

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battle with them with his poetic left hand. Like all satire that lacks a deep and informed vision, Cummings's has rapidly dated, but such neat pieces as "'next to of course god america i,'" or "POEM,OR BEAUTY HURTS MR.VINAL," or "my sweet old etcetera/ aunt lucy" evoke their period with a merciless accuracy—no one did this kind of thing better—and deserve their permanence in the anthologies. Poems like these were a norm from which Cummings's satire occasionally rose to greater subtlety ("the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls") or sank to greater banality ("a politician is an arse upon/ which everyone has sat except a man"), and they add up to a scornfully dismissive poet's-eye view of the rising arc of early-twentieth-century American capitalism.

That modern poetry must be difficult or obscure is a Twenties doctrine, underwritten by some influential Twenties criticism and much Twenties practice, and in many ways Cummings seems to fit the main requirements. Attaching himself to the late-Symbolist tradition, and given to systematic derangement—in his case typographical and syntactical—he is one of the few good writers who can sensibly be called "experimental." His manner is often Dadaistic or Surrealistic, but without the usual freight of tendentious French-style theorizing, and it was always the need to break down the customary bourgeois and materialistic world itself that drove Cummings toward his breaking-down of customary syntax and typography. The real achievements of Cummings's stylistic eccentricities are in fact more often a matter of syntax than they are of typography. On the basis of fairly traditional content and ideas he can convey some arresting perceptions, some of the mind's un-centered moments, some of the ways in which human experience is free of the framework of logic defined by common syntax. "[S]omewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond any experience," or "you open always petal by petal myself," or "the snow carefully everywhere descending" say things that a more orthodox syntax simply will not allow us to say. (Where most of us might decide to let a split infinitive stand, or be fascinated by a suggestively displaced modifier, Cummings ushers us toward an entire extra-grammatical fairyland.) But human experience is also not all *that* free of grammar or logic, and much of the run-of-the-mill typo-syntactic experimentation in Cummings's poems ends up on the far side of intelligibility. He can pull off brilliant tricks by typography alone:

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but what will do for orgasms will not do for most of the rest of human experience. There is a way forward from Cummings's experiments—just as there was a road from Emily Dickinson that led up to them—but it is a much narrower and more spiritually demanding road than he supposed. Sylvia Plath's syntactically eccentric horse-riding experience in "Ariel"—"How one we grow," etc.—is in the Cummings idiom, but the ecstasy of it—"Something else// Hauls me through air—/ Thighs, hair;/ Flakes from my heels"—is more truly Dickinsonian.

We can see now (what many philosophers might have told us) that the limits of syntactical coherence—because they are the limits of language itself—are also the limits of human experiencing. If something is broken down too far conceptually, it will not be experience at all: beyond a certain limit of derangement, the very *mode* of experiencing itself is destroyed. In addition to this, the derangement of typography or syntax, when carried beyond a certain limit, must also work against rhythm, and therefore against the possibility of any deep experiencing of emotion. At one time almost any poet knew that to shift a comma, or even a caesura, can

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be an emotionally decisive act—but many modern poets seem to have forgotten it. Cummings's on-the-page appeal often shrivels to mere eye appeal, whereas effective poetry must be tied to sound, to time, to rhythm (and through rhythm, to the very rhythms of life—as music can always remind us). In Cummings's case we are often left with a verbal artifact that seems lightweight and merely visual—and he can then strike us as no more than a cautious Anglo-epigone of Apollinaire or a cranky grandfather of concrete poetry. This was a poetic road that it was better that modern poetry should not take, and it has mostly not taken it.

Nearly all of Cummings's strongest poems are, for these reasons, a good deal more traditional than they have usually been supposed to be. The extent to which Cummings was a traditionalist has in fact been greatly underestimated. One of the commonest modes of address in his poems is a conventionally lyric one, many of his poems are quite regularly metrical, and nearly a quarter of them are one kind or another of sonnet. Many of the best poems, beneath their broken-up surfaces, are rhythmically very strong. (Like Edna Millay, or like W. H. Auden, Cummings was fond of the *tour de force* of sustaining a single sentence throughout the entire length of a poem.) His worst weaknesses, likewise, are familiarly traditional ones. His limitations of content and his inability to transcend the innocence/experience antithesis leave him stuck in sentimentality along with many of his more backward-looking forebears. When pursued as a philosophy, this becomes a dogmatic refusal to admit new experience, and eventually modulates into sententiousness and arrogance. The case against the intellectual limitations of Cummings's poetry was made long ago by R. P. Blackmur, who showed how Cummings pushed around certain ready-made symbolic counters ("flower," for example—compare Dylan Thomas's "green") as a substitute for thinking. What has not always been recognized is the extent to which this substitute-thought eventually boils down to a message of contempt for the whole modern world.

"At the time of his death in 1962 E. E. Cummings was, next to Robert Frost, the most widely read poet in America," the *Complete Poems*' blurb tells us. Much has changed since then, but we can take heart, perhaps, from the likelihood that Robert Frost still holds the number one spot. Students and the young were at that time among Cummings's main readers, and a Cummings vogue was an almost inevitable component of the 1960s counterculture: he was the archetypal poetic flower-child. Yet it is also too easy to reduce Cummings to merely a Twenties or a Sixties taste. In his brightly hopped-up or deceptively freaked-out way he has left us a bunch of poems that are still worth returning to half a century after they were written, which is more than the majority of poets have ever succeeded in doing. And in today's age, where the dominant experience presented in literature often seems to be one of neurotically self-conscious writerhood, a direct treatment of innocence may have a strong and reinvigorating appeal.

Radical shtick

Tom Bates Rads:
The 1970 Bombing of the
Army Math Research Center at the
University of Wisconsin & Its Aftermath.
HarperCollins, 465 pages, $25

reviewed by James Bowman

Careless or dyslexic browsers might easily look at the bright red title of Tom Bates's book, which he calls "A True Story of the End of the Sixties," and instead of "Rads" read "Reds." But an epic, even of Warren Beatty's standard, this is not. A mock epic would be nearer the mark. For the contrast between reds and rads, between real revolutionaries and those who only played at revolution, is implicit throughout. Bates has given us not only "the end of the sixties"—when radicals in Madison, Wisconsin, and elsewhere were sobered up by the death of a young physicist in a political bombing—but

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also the beginning of the era that has succeeded them, our own, which has been playing at politics ever since.

Bates's hero is Karl Armstrong, who, although he was a former student at the university, did not fit the radical profile—which was one reason that it took so long to catch him. He was of the working class and a native Madisonian, not a pampered son of the middle class, high on his first taste of independence. But, like Caliban who took a drunkard for his god, he admired those who were and fell in love with their easy, self-indulgent way of living, rather as, *mutatis mutandis*, the young Evelyn Waugh fell in love with the dissolute aristocratic style at Oxford. "Though he was not doing well in his studies," writes Bates, "he was not ready to give up the student lifestyle."

Armstrong's atypical background was also the reason, however, that he never really understood what the war, the student revolt, or the Sixties themselves were all about. He thought that when the radicals talked about revolution they really meant it. As Bates reports of two of Karl's roommates, "Devereaux and Conkle had never met anyone as gullible as Karl Armstrong." And Karl fell for the same nonsense again and again, as his own description of his first anti-war demonstration makes clear:

> . . . I was really frightened by the violence of the rhetoric. And I thought that they really were Communists and that they were trying to subvert our government. But I got to talking with these people, and I found out that they were just like any other people except for one thing, that they were much more what I would call human beings than the rest of the people in society. And I wanted to know these people. Because they're very warm people and they weren't crazy.

Which is to say that he took them at their word—first that they were dangerous revolutionaries, then that they weren't, then that they were a different, a kinder, gentler sort of revolutionary.

It was this credulity, this worship from afar of the new species of humanity, as it almost seemed, that made Karl Armstrong not only the moving spirit behind the bombing of the Army Math Research Center but the only one of the four conspirators who was anything like a real terrorist or saboteur. His younger brother, Dwight, was one of nature's juvenile delinquents who would do anything that Karl said, while David Fine and Leo Burt were frightened, middle-class kids shamed by this son of the people into living up to their rhetoric for once. But it never strikes Bates as odd that it never occurred to anyone else at Wisconsin to put up or shut up.

Especially revealing are the terms in which Karl's supporters testified on his behalf when he was finally brought back to Madison from Canada in 1973. Induced to plead guilty to the lesser charge of second-degree murder, Karl was happy to take the opportunity of his sentencing hearing not only to make statements himself about his revolutionary rationale but to bring in a star-studded cast of revolutionary outsiders to testify on his behalf. Among them was Anthony Russo, who said: "I brought a grenade back from Vietnam. And one day I walked down the halls of the RAND Corporation. I looked into the computer room, and I wanted to throw that grenade in there."

He *wanted* to throw the grenade in there! He might have wanted to do the same thing had he had a bad hangover or felt overtired or didn't like someone who worked there, but he wouldn't have done it in those circumstances. And no more did he do it with truly important, world-significant revolutionary aims in view. That tells us rather a lot about those aims and the people who professed to hold them. From first to last, with some few exceptions like Karl Armstrong, this was a "revolution" of wanting to and not doing, of being content with gestures. And even Armstrong was nine-tenths hippie and one-tenth revolutionary, the sort of guy who writes lugubriously about having "even considered suicide" as a result of his troubles.

Somewhere in Balzac is the unarguable statement that there is no such thing as a

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young man who has *not* considered suicide at some time before he reaches the age of thirty. But this adolescent self-pity, agglomerated by adult flattery and native intellectual laziness into the self-consciousness of what Harvey Goldberg called "a traumatized generation," was raised in the 1960s to the very principle of the so-called revolution. "To condemn Karl Armstrong," said the historian Gabriel Kolko, "is to condemn an entire anguished generation." Armstrong himself claimed that "we were in a constant state of terror," because of the threat of nuclear war, and this supposed trauma was enough to justify, if not genuine acts of revolutionary violence (which hardly existed), any self-indulgence that an individual sufferer had a mind to partake of.

For this was only a revolution in the sense that those who claimed to have fought it convinced others besides themselves that something had changed. And therefore something *had* changed: the country became more than ever a land of sentimentalists and fantasists, ready to believe that the ill-disciplined conscript army in Vietnam was the *Wehrmacht* and policemen in a Midwestern university town were storm troopers.

How it takes one back, these easy comparisons with Nazi Germany! Bates reports, obviously with sympathy, Karl's account of childhood conversations with his father: "We talked about Nuremberg, and my father couldn't understand why the German people didn't resist. He thought that just about any act of resistance would have been justified. And that left a lasting impression in my mind." So lasting, indeed, that after Dow Day in Madison and widespread disillusionment over non-violent protest "I examined the institutions of Nazi Germany," as he was later to testify, "and I thought that around the year 1967 the institutions in America were taking on the same character." He says that at the time of the Mifflin Street block party in Madison, the police were "roaming the streets like Gestapo, windows taped up, in unmarked cars."

The extravagance of such comparisons seems to strike Bates as no very outrageous thing. Occasionally, it is true, he shows a certain sense of irony and detachment from the idiocies of his own generation. At one point, for example, he writes about how Karl "became obsessed with the idea that he could accomplish anything if he could only visualize the goal, keeping it constantly in mind. This notion gave him a feeling of power and self-confidence, but his euphoria dissipated when he could not think of any goals." There must be an ironic chuckle in that, but for the most part, the author is still too enamored of the Sixties in contrast to what he characterizes as the "new era of materialism and the pursuit of self-interest" that came after to give the hippie example the critical treatment it deserves.

There is no evidence, for instance, that he sees any of the comedy so evident in retrospect in Leo Burt's having been impressed by a speech by Tom Hayden in 1970, when he said that stopping the war would "require a crazy commitment from us, dooming us for our lives. It will necessitate a scale of commitment that neither we nor the antiwar movement has ever displayed before. It will necessitate acting, not talking, and this is probably the last speech I'm ever going to give." The trouble with Bates is that he remembers all about what the Sixties were like without ever having developed the cringe-reflex that most of us since have acquired.

For if Karl Armstrong is not a perfect symbol of the transition between the 1960s and what has come after, Tom Bates's book about him is. It takes one of the few serious acts by so-called "revolutionaries" of the decade and converts it into a manifestation of individual pathology. Karl, it seems, was an "abused" child—which means that his father beat him a lot—and his sisters, we are told, were sexually abused. The father had himself been abused by his grandmother, and Mr. Bates, now as much the child of the Nineties as he once was of the Sixties, finds in this fact the key to unlock the secret of how the revolution of gestures strayed momentarily into something that looked almost like real revolution.

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> Perhaps it really wasn't the gentle Karl most people knew who stalked Sterling Hall in the summer of 1970, but another Armstrong, Karl's great-grandmother Ann Rector, her anger transmitted through three generations of domestic violence, raising her cane in righteous fury and bringing it down with a mighty thud.

"Perhaps" indeed! But Bates allows himself to leap from this conjecture to the conclusion that the "violence" against Karl Armstrong—that is, the sentencing him to prison for what amounted to about seven years for killing a man and destroying a couple of million dollars worth of property—was as futile as his own. "Least realistic of all was it to batter an already battered child named Karl Armstrong." Bates continually stresses the ways in which Karl was really a gentle soul driven to violence against his will, and its psychological roots are adduced in the service of the more general lesson that Bates claims to have learned from the events of the Sixties: that "violence was counter-productive wherever it was employed as an instrument of policy"—whether by the U.S. government or by those who so bitterly opposed it.

Interestingly, the question of whether or not the violence of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese was similarly "counterproductive" does not come up. Nor does the question of violence directed against those useful bogeymen, the Nazis. In Tom Bates the revolutionary counterculture of the Sixties shades imperceptibly into the therapeutic culture of the Nineties and all that we can see is how the theater of the human spirit's operation has shrunk from the wide world of action to the obscure psychodrama playing itself out between the ears of a lonely revolutionary, fool enough to imagine that the truth was worth fighting for.

Karl Armstrong, according to Bates, was misguided not because he was fighting for a puerile, naïve or stupid understanding of the truth but because he was fighting at all. The only point on which Bates takes issue with the Sixties is in his introduction, where he writes that "to believe that the truth is radical is to presume an absolutely knowable reality." To drive home the point, he takes an ironic epigraph from a statement by the Wisconsin Board of Regents in 1894 about how "the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead."

Quaint, those old-timers who felt so comfortable with a word like "truth." It was really they who started it all by encouraging the radicals to believe that truth was accessible. The subtext is that, really, the University of Wisconsin bombed itself. Armstrong was in the end only a pathetic relic of the past. The real revolution had passed him by. The real revolution was in the change from a culture dominated by the honor of subordination of self to higher purposes involving struggle and sacrifice to a culture which has finally adopted as its own the hippie ethos of doing one's own thing. It is Tom Bates, not Karl Armstrong, who is that revolution's vanguard.

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We are also pleased to announce the publication of an Index to the first ten years of *The New Criterion*, September 1982-June 1992. The Index is available for $12.50 a copy.

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Notebook

In memoriam: Howard Nemerov, 1920-1991

by Willard Spiegelman

Feeling an aggrieved sense of loss for a person one hardly knew may smack of hybris, but in the case of a fan's attachment to a celebrity (even a literary one) the sense often justifies itself. Whereas the heavens themselves are supposed to blaze forth the death of princes, that of poets laureate is signalled first by *Times* obituaries, then by posthumous editions. When Howard Nemerov died in the summer of 1991 at the age of seventy-one, a voice was stilled that more than one reader had come to depend on for certain tones, certain "takes," and a dollop of what our postmodern, millennial sensibility has almost completely eliminated from both its expectations and its vocabulary: wisdom.[1] Wisdom is hard to come by these days, especially from poets.

It is hard to think of him in the past tense.

Where of course he is not. Because of his distinctive voice, compounded of wit and weariness, philosophical conundrums and natural observations, Nemerov endures to give us solace, as did those masters to whose works he kept returning as a reader and teacher during his life: Dante, Montaigne, Freud, and Proust.

Although he garnered honors throughout his lifetime, Nemerov was always old-fashioned, and consequently a little unfashionable. As one wry epigram put it, most American poets "start out Emily and wind up Walt" ("Strange Metamorphosis of Poets"). Nemerov went, predictably, the other way, his poems becoming shorter, drier, and funnier as he learned how to condense deep truths into laconic nuggets. He delighted in going against the grain. For readers who prefer their poets raw, Nemerov was cooked; for those who like them confessional, he was reticent; instead of Sturm-und-Drang, he offered Horatian, exquisitely balanced, poems. He was, as Byron once mockingly called himself, "a moderate-minded bard." In a poem from thirty years ago, "On the Threshold of His Greatness, the Poet Comes Down with a Sore Throat," Nemerov predicted the arrogance of contemporary academic critics who not only disdain the distinction between poetry and criticism but also assert the superiority of the latter. Nemerov always recognized human glory and human pettiness as two sides of one intellectual coin, and felt that "interpretation [is] the deep folly of man / To think that things can squeak at him more than things

1 Nemerov's long-time publisher, the University of Chicago Press, recently brought out *Trying Conclusions: New and Selected Poems, 1961-1991* (161 pages, $18.95), in order to keep Nemerov's work in the public eye. Unfortunately, the volume does Nemerov a disservice, not only by ignoring his first four volumes but also by omitting some of his best (and longer) later poems, such as "Runes," "The View from the Attic Window," "Burning the Leaves," "Lot Later," "Metamorphoses," "This, That & The Other," "The Metaphysical Automobile," "Watching Football on TV," "Equations of a Villanelle," and "Playing the Inventions."

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can" ("The Companions"). "To impose," as Wallace Stevens put it, "is not / to discover." Nemerov modestly denied that one's own responsive or original noises are anything more powerful than a backwards squeak.

Poets, especially those who have made the workshop a university cottage industry, routinely talk about establishing or finding one's voice (another version of the distinction between imposing and discovering): Nemerov had his from the start. And at a time when literary theorists have dismantled both the idea of "voice," replacing it with script, and that of the unified self (or subject), Nemerov always possessed a recognizably cool, detached, wry, appreciative, thoughtful disposition that made of all his best poems a professorial communiqué rather than a bulletin from a battlefront, a narcissistic self-analysis, or a *cri de coeur*. Writers become their admirers, as Auden said of Yeats, and they achieve the kind of immortality conventionally praised by Horace in his odes and Shakespeare in his sonnets. Art is long, life brief. But Nemerov's art always sounded more like speech or song, even if in a diminished key, than like the black-inked lines of Shakespeare's inscribed monuments. One might well say of him what Conrad's Marlow says of the still unmet Mr. Kurtz: "The man presented himself as a voice." Part Talmudic sage, part Yankee philosopher, part rational skeptic, Nemerov always seemed so, well, sane.

Nemerov undid the categories of plain and fancy by transcending them. Whereas the plain—in diction—is usually flat and insipid, and has its own pretensions (to honesty and sincerity, however one might define them), the fancy is often self-indulgent, baroque, precious, or jejune. Nemerov's diction and syntax were usually plain, that is unarcane (not for him the fussiness of Stevens, Merrill, Ashbery), but his materials were often just the opposite: physics, philosophy, myth and ritual, the stuff of a lifetime of living in and deriving knowledge from books rather than whatever their opposite might be. Nemerov wrote an impersonal poetry with a distinctly personal voice. In this his work is diametrically opposed to those often interchangeable, tiresome performances of more "personal" writers. His family seldom make appearances in his poetry; he was the least cannibalistic of contemporary poets, the opposite, for example, of Robert Lowell.

The major "event" in Nemerov's life seems to have been, as it always is for men who see combat, a war. His experience as a Canadian Air Force pilot, and then an American one, must have made him grateful for the anticlimax of the next forty-six years. (See "The Afterlife," a recollection of the "Gates of Paradise" at Fort Dix from which he returned to civilian life.) With few exceptions, Nemerov waited until *War Stories* (1987) to write extensively about his war, and by then all was sanctified by distance, clarified in and by art. Passion spent was rendered marmoreal, objective, unhorrifying, and positively clean, like the unseen corpses of airmen who never returned, and unlike those of mangled infantry troops. There was relief that could be measured in being granted a quiet posthumous existence. In part it was the relief of knowing that one was leading what Robert Lowell, in his elegy to John Berryman, referred to as "the same life, / the generic one / our generation offered." Nemerov's voice was that of those who survived the war, sired kids, buried parents, got a mortgage, had an affair, were left by the children: finally, "[We] Are done with it. What is there to discuss? / There's nothing left for us to say of us" ("Thirtieth Anniversary Report of the Class of '41"). The individual merged with the group.

Such merging had recognizable effects on Nemerov's philosophical and aesthetic preferences. His beauties, the challenges posed in and by his poems, are those of the middle way. "Figures of Thought" asserts what I take to be the central tenet of his aesthetics as well as of his natural philosophy: "The beautiful / In nature as in art, [is] not obvious / Not inaccessible, but just between." Everything is "hidden in nature, but not deeply so." For that reason, Nemerov's signature riddling both challenges and satisfies:

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we have the (repeated) pleasures of discovering the figure in the carpet, which once found continues to surprise and delight. The familiar attracts; it neither repels nor bores. Surely this is one definition of "art," which has taken its fair share of knocks lately from apostles of the political right and left. To some, Nemerov might seem too "suburban" (an epithet used by the critic Robert Von Hallberg) in both the neutral and the pejorative senses of that term. Taking the same walk every day, from home to office and back, imitating the habits of that other domestic walker, Wallace Stevens, Nemerov attended scrupulously to changes in landscape, weather, and inner mood.

Since Nemerov always confessed in interviews that his major knowledge of the world came through books, it's hardly surprising to hear the tones of the lecture hall, or more specifically the seminar room, coming across in his poetic advice. In a rare (presumably) autobiographical poem, "Boy with Book of Knowledge," he asks his version of the famous question Wordsworth posed at the start of *The Prelude*. "How shall I seek the origin?" becomes, in Nemerov's idiom, a consideration of the sources of his own poetic and scholarly instincts. Where did they come from? Being now, he says, closer to death than to birth, he sadly acknowledges "all he will not know, / The silent library brooding through the night / With all its lights continuing to burn." And in that library—real and imagined—Nemerov brooded too, and constructed his poems. In another rare autobiographical piece, "Landscape with Self-Portrait," he paints himself as a "life-defeated self," an old retired codger looking out over his landscape. This twenty-eight-line single-sentence poem is extraordinary in its syntactic sinews as well as in its peaceful acceptance. But it is not unusual in its wisdom. Thoughtful and polite, Nemerov always wore his considerable learning lightly. He was academic in the best sense of that word, just as he was witty in a serious way. T. S. Eliot's famous charge against Milton, that he wrote poetry as though it were a solemn game, may be countered by Frost's aphorism that poetry is play for mortal stakes. Nemerov established himself in this conservative tradition, just he tended to lean on the pentameter line. He shared thematic interests, but hardly stylistic ones, with A. R. Ammons; both of them kept returning, as to a myth, to all the old dichotomies: of self and world, unity and multiplicity, reflection and reflexion (in Nemerov's insistent spelling), inner and outer, matter and energy.

In a recent book on American poetry, the poet-critic Wyatt Prunty distinguishes between poets who sing and those who talk. This is a convenient but unreliable peg on which to hang an evaluation. Nemerov constantly crossed the borders. All is plainsong, all is aria, often simultaneously. A partial explanation for his distinct vocalism was his prosodic debt to Auden, Yeats, and Frost, those masters of the middle voice at whose schools he studied: at the first he learned how to express a Horatian temperament, at the second how to sing, and at the third how to use the American sentence as a base for stanzaic forms. Even when conducting real or imagined dialogues with more abstruse colleagues (like Kenneth Burke and William Empson), Nemerov never strayed far from the paths of wit and easy colloquialisms, or from his constant efforts at "keeping it simple," as he praises Vermeer (of all people!) for doing.

Another source of Nemerov's distinctive voice must have been an innate Romantic temperament, a temperament that responded at least as strongly to elegy as to satire, that must have seemed unfashionable to a poet who came of age during the full flowering of modernism. Even as a young man Nemerov had a strong sense of loss, real or potential. And by the time he reached poetic maturity, his natural contemplations could strike the heightened music of a Renaissance lament: "So brief, so brave, so april pale / The little flowering before the leaves / Unfold themselves" ("First Things, and Last"). In another beautiful poem, "The Dying Garden," Nemerov suggests more than his usual intimations of mortality as he

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wistfully contemplates an autumnal scene and begins to pull out all the stops, ending by out-Tennysoning Tennyson: "Somber November in amber and umber embering out." The mushy mellifluousness of this line is practically comic, or at least self-consciously witty, because it goes against the grain of Nemerov's usual feeling for plain and easy speech, monosyllabic whenever possible. Countering the death of the year with his own life-affirming noises, Nemerov struts his verbal stuff here, a little unconvincingly.

His truer manner was the one he shared with an unnamed philospher in a late poem who says "There's nothing so stupid I can't learn from it." Part of Nemerov's charm derives from his innocent openness, beneath his worldly skepticism, to all experience, whether heard, read, or observed. Like Blake's heaven in a grain of sand, Nemerov's world is writ equally large and small. We can take the measure of his miniaturizing in a motto from the dream of a woman who sees Christ, "an acorn in his hand, / And asking what might this be was answered thus: / 'It is in a manner everything that is made'" ("Acorn, Yom Kippur"). Looking at anything allows one to reflect on oneself and on everything else as well. Any object repeats the world and the viewer. Things answer the questions we put to them. Figures of thought easily become figures for thought. And all become occasions for muted self-analysis, as in "By Al Lebowitz's Pool":

> Reflection and reflexion, lovely words
> I shall be sorry to let go when I let go:
> Reflected light, reflexion of the wave;
> For things reflected are more solemn and still
> Than in themselves they are, it is the
> doubling
> Perhaps that seems to bring them nearer
> thought;
> Could we reflect, did water not reflect?

Not only the heft of an iambic pentameter line, the balance at once rhythmic and verbal, but also the sad tone marks these lines as characteristic of Nemerov. Letting go will mean letting go of words as well as self, and one often has the feeling that for Nemerov the former was at least as important as the latter. This most bookish of poets had a commitment to trying to understand the world that made him seem positively self-effacing. Never sentimental, however: a birthday poem to Allen Tate sounds more like a memento mori: "We live on sayings said in myths, / And die of them as well, or ill," he gleefully announces as if refusing to let anyone, especially the birthday boy, forget the grim truth that everything ends in death and that nothing matters. Nemerov's modesty in the face of both natural bounty and its inevitable demise made him pooh-pooh all efforts to "capitalize [the] Self" in favor of seeing "With opened eyes emptied of speech / The real world where the spelling mind / Imposes with its grammar book / Unreal relations on the blue / Swallows" ("The Blue Swallows"). The battle or the cooperation between self and world never ceased to attract him. Are we discovering things in our observations, or merely inventing them? Do we receive, or impose? Nemerov often suggests, as he does in his reflection upon reflection above, that he's not so much "writing this verse" as "reading it / Up out of water and light and shadow and leaf."

But that would be a too easy innocence, and Nemerov was never innocent easily or for long. Always there was the waiting sense that like Adam we have fallen, that the "mind's eye lit the sun," that we impose our ideas and our bodies upon an unreceptive, unconscious world, that our connection to that world, as he summarizes it in an epigrammatic quatrain ("Knowledge"), is always partial, contingent, and haphazard:

> Not living for each other's sake,
> Mind and the world will rarely rime;
> The raindrops aiming at the lake
> Are right on target every time.

The world and mind will rarely rime, but Nemerov's poems often do: in proposing our awkward alienation from the world he

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simultaneously corrects it, at least through the consoling sleight-of-hand of his art. In this quatrain the simple fact of rhyme (what John Hollander might identify as the poem's "fiction of form") undoes the lines' discursive content.

Nemerov kept returning to our transactions with, and within, the world. One reason he was so fond of painters and of poems about painting was that painting makes the clearest attempt to transpose within a permanent medium the materials available to our tyrant eye. Its "work is not to paint the visible . . . it is to render visible" ("The Painter Dreaming in the Scholar's House"). Poetry shows the interpenetration of word and world, and painting the interpenetration of world and eye. It comes down, pretty much, to the same thing. Not for Nemerov a poetry with feelings, or lines, either, spontaneously overflowing. He preferred his lines, in both poems and paintings, to be clear, precise, exact. Like his "painter of the human mind," Nemerov the poet is constantly "Finding and faithfully reflecting the mindfulness / That is in things, and not the things themselves." Our relation to the world will always seem like an off-rhyme. Cosmic comfort, like the domestic harmonies of a marriage, is tentative, at best, and constantly renegotiable.

That a voice should seem assured in its tentativeness, confident in its modesty, ought to give us cause for admiration. For all its poise and polish, Nemerov's poetry returns us to Robert Frost's admonition to attend to the shape and above all to the sound of sentences, to the roundness as well as the shifts of American speech. It also asks to be heard among the company of those whom Auden referred to as "The Horatians," the lucky few who live often apart, often anonymous, who "do what it seems to us we were made for, look at / this world with a happy eye / but from a sober perspective." Nemerov looked along with those painters he long admired, and he spoke in unmistakable tones, both soberly and happily.

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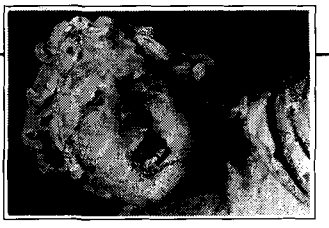

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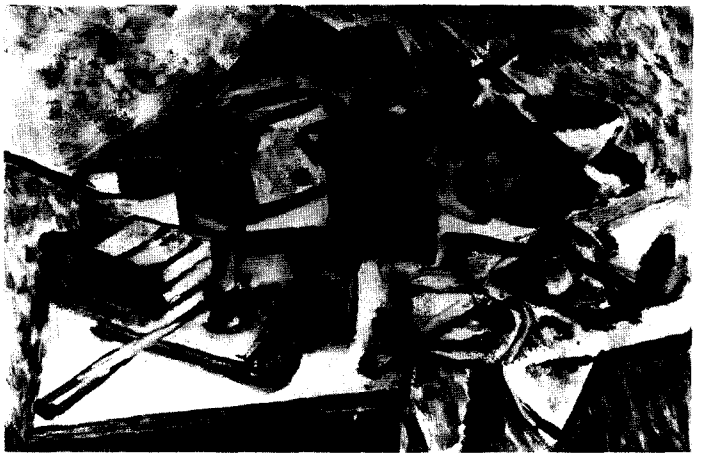

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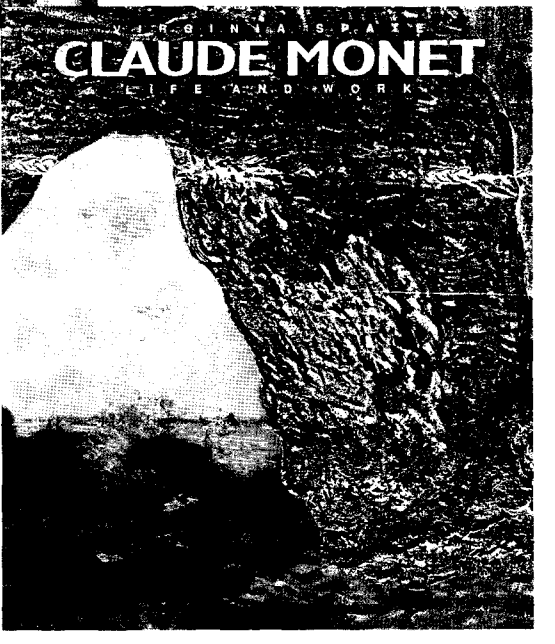

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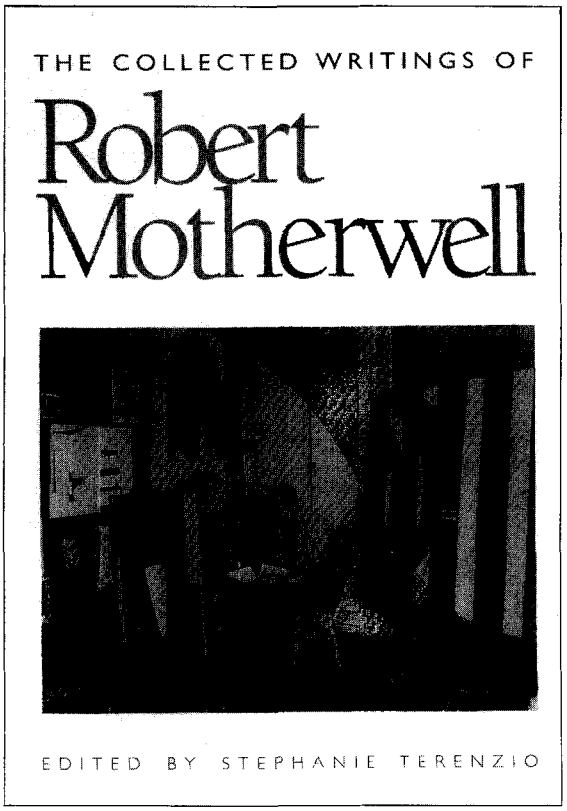

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